

The Tripolar World and the Bloc Triangles of East Asia

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Abstract

As the world slides into turmoil, a Russia-U.S.-China “strategic triangle” is emerging. In East Asia, its participants are beginning to form Washington-

Tokyo-Seoul and Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang blocs. The article analyzes the main strategic options for the actors of the tripolar world, the balance of power in the Russia-China-U.S. triangle, and the current state of the blocs: while the “Western” bloc is heading towards the creation of an analog to NATO, the “Eastern” bloc appears to be an ad-hoc alliance (albeit conjured by a shared perception of threat). However, although the creation of two triangles is clearly causing general tension in East Asia and fueling a regional arms race, a clash on the Korean Peninsula seems unlikely, as the two Koreas will increase tensions while trying to avoid an armed conflict that could be fatal for both.

Keywords: tripolar world, strategic triangle, balance of power, East Asia, “Asian NATO,” “Asian Warsaw Pact”.

At the beginning of this decade, the world entered a period of great turmoil. Such transitional moments, inevitable during the collapse of obsolete international systems and the emergence of new ones, happen with increasing frequency (1618-1648, 1792-1815, 1914-1919, 1938-1945, 1988-1992). The current transitional period is characterized by the following processes.

Firstly, developing countries are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the world order in which the U.S. and the “collective West” dictate their will to others. The Western “rules-based order” is perceived as imposed by Washington, and international organizations—which ought to act as arbitrators—are instead seen as passing off Western sanctions and military interventions as the will of the international community. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “The global majority, representing 85 percent of the world’s population, advocates a more equitable distribution of global resources and respect for cultural diversity, as well as consistent democratization of international affairs” (Lavrov, 2023). U.S. President Joe Biden also speaks of a new system: “I think we have an opportunity to do things, if we’re bold enough and have enough confidence in ourselves, to unite the world in ways that it never has been. We were in a post-war period for 50 years where

it worked pretty damn well, but that's sort of run out of steam. ... It needs a new—a new world order in a sense, like that was a world order” (Biden, 2023).

Secondly, ongoing de-globalization, i.e. the appearance of economic divisions based on political ones. The common political, economic, and information space is disintegrating into blocs (different from the Cold-War-era military alliances). The current division is probably deeper than that in the 20th century, when economic interaction between the two main military-political blocs did not stop.

Thirdly, war has returned as an acceptable way to resolve political disputes. An armed conflict as a solution to problems, which was previously employed mainly by some Third World countries, is no longer taboo for the great powers, especially after the events in Yugoslavia in 1999. This increases the likelihood of global war.

The main centers of power today are Russia, the United States, and China, whose relations form the “strategic triangle.” Each pursues its own goals by various means. In East Asia, they are forming the military-political alliances of Washington-Tokyo-Seoul and Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang, which will shape the region's landscape in the short and medium terms.

This paper utilizes the systemic, historical, and genetic approaches to the study of international relations; scenario forecasting (Akhremenko, 1999); situational analysis (Primakov and Khrustalyov, 2006); and the theory of self-fulfilling prophecies, according to which “public definitions of a situation (prophecies or predictions) become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments” (Merton, 1948, p. 195).

THE TRIPOLAR WORLD AND ITS ACTORS' BASIC STRATEGIES

A tripolar world is quite common in history. For example, the USSR, Germany, and Great Britain became the three centers of power in Europe (for a very short period of 1939-1941): a temporary bloc between the former two strengthened them, but its destruction and the subsequent alliance between the West and the USSR led to the defeat of the Third Reich. The fall of the Eastern Bloc at the end of the Cold

War was partly due to the Sino-Soviet split and the resulting tripolarity of the 1970s and 1980s. Feng Shaolei calls “trilateral relationships” a “fairly basic category” in international history. “Behind any bilateral or multilateral relations, there is a shadow of one or several countries as ‘a third party’” (Feng, 2019).

If a bipolar world can be likened to scales, then a tripolar world is a three-dimensional rotating system of checks and balances. As in a bipolar world, each actor gathers junior allies to form defensive alliances, or softer associations based on “smart power” or value hegemony. Allies often try to secure strategic autonomy in areas important to them, as in the case of the two East Asian triangles.

There are several strategies for “politics-a-trois.”

First. “Weight on the scales”: The third actor is much weaker than the other two, so the world order seems bipolar. However, the two main rivals are unable to win or capitalize on success without the third’s help, so they try to win it over, sometimes in exchange for a degree of strategic autonomy or discretion outside the main confrontation. Often, the third actor builds up its power through skillful maneuvering, after which the model changes.

Second. “Friendship against,” or “balancing.” Two actors join forces against the third, whose increased potential poses a common threat. Such an alliance is often pragmatic and may bring together unnatural partners. For example, the forced cooperation between the Anglo-American bloc and the Soviet Union against the Third Reich in World War II, expressed by Winston Churchill as: “If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference of the Devil in the House of Commons” (Nagorski, 2007, pp. 150-151). Such alliances may have an ideological basis, but once the external threat is gone, internal problems return to the fore, and yesterday’s allies become enemies.

Third. The stratagem “sit on the mountain and watch the tigers fight,” optionally then finishing off the weakened winner. As Harry Truman put it: “If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible, although I don’t want to see Hitler victorious under any circumstances” (McCullough, 1992).

An “*ideal*” strategy incorporating elements of all the others is extremely rare in pure form. It implies consensus regarding spheres of influence, the rules of the game, and the means of dispute resolution. This was the model adopted after World War II, when all the victorious powers, including China, became permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto power. However, as competition intensifies or rules are abused, this model stops working.

Within the strategic triangle, Russia combines elements of each of these strategies, since, given a volatile balance of power, one strategy is easily replaced by another.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE RUSSIA-CHINA-U.S. TRIANGLE

Russia-China-U.S. relations are in balance. In the case of Russia and the United States, whose nuclear capabilities significantly exceed China's, nuclear parity limits the probability of a conflict.

The U.S.-China balance is based on enormous economic interconnectedness and interdependence; reducing dependence on Chinese imports has become an important element of Washington's preparations for a potential conflict.

The Russia-China relations are based on shared goals and a common threat from the United States, which neither Russia nor China can effectively counter alone. China's economic dominance is counterbalanced by its difficulties in building relations with other major players in the developing world and its need for Russia as the core of BRICS and as a more acceptable partner for countries like India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, and Turkey. “Russia is virtually the only major partner and ally for China” (Babaev, 2023a). Beijing and Moscow seek to contain Washington in order to oppose its preservation of its previous political hegemony (Lukin, 2023).

Relations between Moscow and Beijing are traditionally seen as a partnership. But it remains unclear whether this is a strategic partnership, or a tactical alliance driven by a common threat. The Russian political elite are seeking to build a “friendship against,” but also to avoid excessive involvement in the U.S.-China conflict as the latter's junior partner. As Yevgeny Primakov pointed out, “one of the

main directions of Russian foreign policy should be staying away from an alliance with China against the United States and from an alliance with the United States against China, but building relations with the two superpowers on the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation” (Ivanova, 2016, p. 117).

A monograph by the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences argues: “If a military-political alliance is created, China and Russia will inevitably face the ‘master/slave’ problem, which could exacerbate existing disagreements. This is why both countries adhere to the principle of comprehensive strategic partnership rather than the principle of allied relations” (Morozov and Batyuk, 2022, p. 523). As confrontation with Washington intensifies, relations between Moscow and Beijing will strengthen, but the U.S. will also step up efforts to divide the two, in several areas.

Firstly, as one of the authors has noted (Asmolov, 2007), the Russian political elite dislike the West, but at least they know it well enough, whereas they have very limited knowledge of China, and the unknown always frightens. The U.S. and Europe are accordingly using liberal-minded academics and anti-Maoist veterans to generate Russian fear of an alliance with China. However, familiarity with China is growing within the Russian government and managerial class.

The *second* thrust of the U.S.’s policy is to seek the defeat of its opponents in detail, and to create problems for Moscow that prevent it from helping China against the U.S. This is, in fact, Washington’s main geostrategic goal in the Ukraine conflict. Even if Russia successfully completes its operation in Ukraine and the current Ukrainian regime surrenders, Russia will have to spend enormous resources to rebuild the new territories.

Finally, there is the potential for conflict between Beijing and Moscow, although both sides are trying to stifle it. For instance, an official Chinese map of the PRC, printed in 2023, marks the Russian half of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island as also belonging to China. In a different situation, this would have caused an uproar, with Moscow accusing Beijing of making territorial claims, but instead the Russian Foreign Ministry emphasized that “the border issue between our

countries has been resolved once and for all,” and Russian sinologists hurried to say that it was a misunderstanding due to a technical error (DVhab, 2023).

In 2019, Feng Shaolei (2019) drew attention to the “shallow” relations in the China-U.S.-Russia triangle. Feng believes that China-U.S.-Russia relations differ from the Cold War in that they lack a conflict of ideologies or grand strategies. He notes that NATO’s eastward expansion, regardless of Russia’s interests, forced Moscow towards Beijing, and that more generally all steps by China and Russia were taken under external pressure.

Also in 2019, Zhao Huasheng pointed out that a Sino-Russian alliance would entail openly designating the U.S. as an enemy. An alliance reduces the common threat, but the designation of a great power as an enemy is itself a source of enormous strategic pressure. This is why “not allowing a partner to turn into an enemy” would be a great strategic success for China, as Beijing “rejects the Cold War mentality” and the “zero-sum game.” Zhao argues a formal Sino-Russian military-political alliance is very unlikely unless Sino-American and Russo-American relations continue to deteriorate (Zhao, 2019).

EAST ASIA’S WESTERN TRIANGLE: TOWARDS AN ANALOG TO NATO

Russia, China, and the United States can tentatively be called part of “Greater East Asia.” Their two triangles—provisionally “Eastern” (Russia-China-North Korea) and “Western” (U.S.-Japan-South Korea)—border one another at the Korean Peninsula’s 38th parallel.

The “Western” triangle has by far surpassed the “Eastern” one in institutionalizing its alliance. A trilateral summit at Camp David in 2023 became an important step in this regard (see: Camp David Principles, 2023; Joint Statement, 2023b). A system of interaction, consultation, and information exchange is already operational, and the “Commitment to Consult” among Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States is enshrined in a special document (Commitment, 2023). The “Camp David Principles” reaffirmed the two countries’ commitment, expressed in an April 2023 joint statement by J. Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol, to creating a “unified Korean Peninsula that is

free and at peace” (Joint Statement, 2023a), which implies specific measures to contain China and, in our opinion, the actual elimination of North Korea’s sovereignty. Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo have set up a security hotline to provide round-the-clock voice and video communication between their leaders and top officials (KIR, 2023a). Exercises, during which the “southern side” will practice the use of nuclear weapons, are slated for 2024 (Yonhap, 2023a).

The bloc has also been substantiated ideologically: it “will continue to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific based on a respect for international law, shared norms, and common values” (Camp David Principles, 2023).

It is clear that the “Western” triangle in East Asia is not a direct analog to NATO, but the new century may prompt a revision of Washington’s military-political guarantees to Seoul and Tokyo, currently made in separate documents. Contacts between South Korea and NATO are also evolving (KIR, 2023b). Republican Congressman Mike Lawler has introduced a bill establishing a Task Force on the Indo-Pacific Treaty Organization (IPTO) (Yonhap, 2023b). So talk about an “Asian NATO” is not unfounded, to put it mildly (Green, 2023).

South Korean media suggest that its creation is urgently necessitated by the deepening cooperation between Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang, hinting at secret agreements between them. *The Korea Herald* said straightforwardly that “confrontation between the free world and authoritarian dictatorships seems to be growing acute on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea, China and Russia are revealing their solidarity plainly” (Korea Herald, 2023). And *InsideOver* (2023) called the rapprochement between Beijing, Pyongyang, and Moscow a “triangle of death.”

EAST ASIA’S SHALLOW EASTERN TRIANGLE

The Russia-China-North Korea triangle, just like the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, has been brought about by the threat from the U.S. and opposition to it, but has not been institutionalized. In fact, there is an agreement on military assistance between Beijing and Pyongyang, but there is no formal military alliance between Russia

and North Korea. Although the exchange of visits in 2023 spurred various rumors, there are no official documents that could compare to those signed at Camp David. Different predictions have been made regarding future Russia-DPRK military cooperation, depending on the further collapse of the existing world order (Asmolov, 2023), but these are just predictions.

Russia and China pursue common goals on the Korean Peninsula.

Firstly, they are committed to resolving the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue by political and diplomatic methods, trying to freeze the issue and curb tensions as much as possible. North Korea's nuclear doctrine is similar to Russia's, and therefore fits the *image of a responsible power*.

Secondly, Russia is interested in the existence of North Korea not only as a buffer, but also as one of its few ideological allies (Asmolov and Zakharova, 2023). Moscow and Pyongyang jointly oppose the U.S.'s efforts to demonize, isolate, and eventually destroy North Korea. On 19 October 2023, Sergei Lavrov noted that "the progressive development of bilateral relations [with the DPRK] meets the interests of our states and contributes to strengthening peace and security in Northeast Asia. The development of our relations with the People's Republic of China serves the same purpose" (Lavrov, 2023).

In practice, this yielded efforts by Russia and China to mitigate anti-DPRK sanctions, which Moscow and Beijing argue should reflect Pyongyang's moratorium on nuclear tests and ICBM launches. Unfortunately, the Biden administration consistently torpedoed such initiatives, causing Pyongyang to resume ICBM launches in 2022.

Also, in 2022, Russia and China blocked U.S. attempts to impose new sanctions against North Korea through the UN Security Council and to otherwise use the body for propagandistic purposes against Pyongyang. On 26 May 2022, Russia and China vetoed the draft U.S. sanctions resolution (UN, 2022), and subsequent sanctions proposals have not even reached a vote. On 28 March 2024, Russia vetoed the extension of the UN expert group's mandate to monitor anti-DPRK sanctions' implementation. (It must be said that a number of Russian experts believe that Moscow's decision to join the 2016-2017 sanctions

was a mistake (Zhebin, 2023), and its continued adherence to them “raises many questions.”)

On 25 August 2023, Russian and Chinese diplomats at the UN Security Council barred an open discussion on human rights in North Korea, which could have led to an accusatory resolution. The Russian representative made it clear that the Security Council is not authorized to deal with human rights issues (Nebenzia, 2023).

North Korea is also strengthening ties with China and Russia. Its relations with Beijing are largely based on China’s status as its main trading partner, and in 2018, the two countries declared that their friendship is a continuous process, sealed with blood shed during the Korean War of 1950-1953, based on the socialist ideology upheld by fraternal parties, and invulnerable to contemporary disturbances. When either country celebrates an important holiday or event, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un exchange telegrams (KCNA, 2023a, b) or verbal messages (KCNA, 2023c), including statements that “China and the DPRK are the friendly neighbors linked by the same mountain and rivers,” and “the traditional China-DPRK friendship has weathered the trials of the changed international situation for a long time, constantly maintained the trend of its development and got stronger with the passage of time” (KCNA, 2023b).

North Korea and Russia are also developing their relations, including with: a visit to Pyongyang by Russian officials led by then Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (late July 2023); Kim Jong Un’s six-day trip to Russia (12-18 September 2023); Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s visit to Pyongyang (October 2023); Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako’s visit (December 2023).

As Artyom Lukin points out, Pyongyang realizes that its nuclear weapons can provide “deterrence against direct aggression, but they are useless in most other crisis scenarios.” The emergence of the “Western” triangle makes the situation even more disturbing. South Korea greatly surpasses North Korea in conventional strength, and regionally-deployed U.S. nuclear weapons could neutralize North Korea’s (Lukin, 2024). Only strategic allies can make the difference. “China will stay on as Pyongyang’s main economic benefactor

and diplomatic protector while Russia plays the role of the North's main military partner. Moscow will be happy with such a role if only because it has little to lose with Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo" (Lukin, 2023).

There are plenty of problems within the "Eastern" triangle. For example, unlike North Korea, China does not openly support Russia in the Ukraine conflict, as it wants to avoid encouraging secession. There are also disagreements over a route for Chinese ships along the Tumen River to the Sea of Japan, and mutual jealousy arises over Central Asia and Mongolia. North Korea pursues its own security policy and does not always listen to Moscow and Beijing's recommendations, to put it mildly. Although North Korea is heavily dependent on Chinese raw materials and aid, security always takes priority. It remains unclear whether Pyongyang is delaying a new nuclear test at Beijing's request.

The members of the "Eastern" triangle are more equal than their Western counterparts, as they lack any suzerain/vassal relationship. We believe there are several reasons for that: all three countries share borders with each other but have no unresolved territorial issues (the aforementioned media mini-scandal around the cartographic incident with Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island is due rather to journalists' inclination towards sensationalism than some real political friction), all three possess nuclear weapons, and all three have no historical claims to each other.

What are the prospects for an "Asian Warsaw Pact" in response to an "Asian NATO"? Stephen Walt argues that "balancing behavior is not triggered directly by the power of others, but rather by a perceived threat" (Walt, 1985, pp. 8-9). Western fear of the "triangle of death" could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

TRIANGLE STANDOFF: WHAT TO PREPARE FOR

War is in the air. According to the Near Global Survey 2023 (Yonhap, 2023c), 15 percent of surveyed Western experts believe that a military clash between Beijing and Washington is likely within the next five to ten years, and another 10 percent expect it within five years. "None of

the experts forecast a compromise between the two countries within the next five years, signaling a ‘prevailing sense of uncertainty’ in diplomatic relations” (Ibid).

There are three places where tensions between the East Asian triangles may come to a head (Babaev, 2023b): the Korean Peninsula; Taiwan pushed by the West into formal secession from China; and the South China Sea marked by conflicting island and maritime claims by China (PRC), Taiwan (Republic of China/ROC), Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

However, in our view, a large-scale Korean conflict is becoming less likely. Formally, tension is rising, with the parties openly warning of nuclear war and incorporating nuclear strikes in their exercises. The U.S.-South Korea Freedom wargames in August 2022 featured nuclear-capable strategic bomber raids and a response to a nuclear attack (TASS, 2023), while North Korean wargames have practiced the use of tactical nuclear weapons (Izvestia, 2023). However, hawks are not in power in the North or South. The South Korean military understands that the North’s military-industrial capabilities will not permit an easy victory over it, and that an advantage over Pyongyang can be attained only through military modernization and/or by deploying nuclear weapons in South Korea.

As experts have repeatedly noted, if an armed conflict occurs, both sides would be incentivized to strike immediately at maximum strength, including with nuclear weapons (Lobov and Polenova, 2017). The North would target decision-making centers, strategic facilities, military bases, and logistics hubs in Japan and South Korea. The prospect of such damage is likely unacceptable to the Western coalition.

Nevertheless, “irrational” sources of conflict remain: for example, a loss of nerves, miscommunication, or a deliberate provocation by ultraconservative forces like Fighters For a Free North Korea, which at one point seriously considered sending coronavirus-infected objects to North Korea (Hankyoreh, 2020). In this case, the North would have to react, and the South would have no choice but to respond.

And yet a conflict of Sino-American origin is much more likely. Perhaps over the disputed islets in the East China Sea, which were mentioned in the Camp David accords, or over Taiwan. The Chinese leadership has repeatedly spoken of the need to prepare for a military operation in Taiwan (Pomfret and Pottinger, 2023), and the United States has reaffirmed its readiness to enter into an armed confrontation with China (CBS News, 2022). The situation has not changed after Taiwan's election on 13 January 2024.

Most likely, neither Korea would want to get overly involved in a Sino-American confrontation unless it threatens their interests. Seoul's most likely reaction to a Taiwan war would be diplomatic support for Washington or non-lethal arms supplies to Taiwan. Anything more would make it a target for Chinese attacks. North Korea is even less likely to intervene on China's behalf, as Juche does not require North Korea to sacrifice its interests for the sake of a senior partner, and Beijing may itself prefer a minimum of North Korean assistance, as Taiwan is an internal affair of China. The South China Sea is even further removed from the interests of either Korea.

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The U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle is of global importance. Moscow and Beijing stand united, but Russia should refrain from excessive involvement in the Sino-American conflict, which does not directly affect its interests, and avoid becoming a “junior partner.” The limits of involvement might be defined in alliance negotiations.

“Minor” triangles—Russia-China-North Korea and U.S.-Japan-South Korea—are forming in East Asia. The “Western” bloc is much more institutionalized and is likely to continue consolidating until at least the spring of 2027, when South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's term ends.

Although the triangles' emergence is increasing general tension in East Asia and driving a regional arms race, a conflict of Korean origin seems less likely than a conflict over Taiwan. In the medium term (or at least until 2027), the two Koreas will continue to raise tensions, while seeking to avoid an armed conflict that could be fatal for both.

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