

The Strategic Triangle in the 21st Century: Implications for Sino-Russian Relations

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Abstract: Over the course of the Cold War, the relationship between the USSR, China, and the USA had been influenced by power shifts within a tripolar system, also referred to as the strategic triangle. Following four dyadic power shifts, the balance of power within the strategic triangle changed in favor of the United States in the late 1980s. After a decade of U.S. hegemony, triangular politics gained momentum under the guise of “multipolarity” which Russia and China propagated in the late 1990s. The Sino-Russian “strategic relationship directed towards the 21st century” subsequently proved to be nothing more than a shield against U.S. unilateralism in global affairs. Economic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is largely unbalanced, inasmuch as China, not Russia, has been playing a major role in bilateral trade. Military and political aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship are greatly influenced by Russia and China’s relations with the United States. The only sphere where Chinese and Russian interests by and large coincide has been foreign policy. China’s transformation into an independent power in world affairs will obviate the need for the Sino-Russian strategic partnership and pave the way for direct U.S.-China rivalry.

Introduction

Since the 1950s, the relations between the Soviet Union, China, and the United States have witnessed a number of consequential geopolitical reconfigurations caused by power shifts within a tripolar system, also referred to as the “strategic triangle”. Following the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union pursued *Realpolitik* policies vis-à-vis each other, seeking to contain the power capabilities of their rivals by means of triangular politics, that is, to manipulate relations with one country so as to gain leverage over another country (Lieberthal, 1979: 7). The empirical study by Goldstein and Freeman (1991) indicated the existence of such a triangular system of complex, asymmetrical connections among U.S.-Chinese, U.S.-Soviet, and Sino-Soviet relations. The study also showed that triangular influences had a direct impact only on the Sino-Soviet dyad (Goldstein and Freeman, 1991: 30). These influences within the strategic triangle will be analyzed through Morgenthau’s (1948) theoretical framework of the power balance within tripolar systems. Accordingly, power balance is a process whereby the ability of state A to dominate

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state C is balanced, if not outweighed, by state B's power, while B's power over C is balanced by the power of A (Morgenthau, 1948: 184). In other words, if relations among units changed in favor of the United States, the Soviet Union's power would be diminished. Conversely, if the balancer state, China, gained advantage over the United States, the Soviet Union's power would be secure. China or the Soviet Union's worsening or improvement of relations with the United States would therefore cause dyadic power shifts within the system.

Four developments marked the realignment among the three powers during the Cold War: the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s, the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, the Sino-American rapprochement of the 1970s, and the Sino-Soviet rapprochement of the 1980s. As the prominent realist scholar Kenneth Waltz observed, "feeling American antagonism and fearing American power, China drew close to Russia after World War II and remained so until the United States less, and the Soviet Union seemed more, of a threat to China" (Waltz, 2000: 38) Lowell Dittmer (1981) posited a causal nexus between military confrontation between the USSR and China and U.S.-Soviet *détente* in the 1960-70s, arguing that the dispute between China and the Soviet Union was caused by the "disintegration of the rigid structure of bipolarity at the end of the 1950s" (Dittmer, 1981: 493) The balance of power within the strategic triangle changed in favor of the United States in the 1980s due to the Soviet Union's structural decay and China's inability to contain U.S. power in Asia. Because U.S. power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union could not be balanced by China, a power shift among the states ensued. As a consequence, China and the Soviet Union joined efforts at counterbalancing U.S. power at the end of 1980s. For this partnership was based on the pursuit of national interests and geopolitical counterbalancing, the relations between Moscow and Beijing went through cycles of change in the following decades. But most importantly, China's inability to contain U.S. power following the collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed the disruption of the power balance within the strategic triangle.

After a decade of U.S. hegemony, triangular politics gained momentum under the guise of "multipolarity" in the late 1990s when China and Russia embarked on countering U.S. global power and establishing a new axis of cooperation. Common security interests and geopolitical calculations generally united Russia and China against U.S. military actions throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The Sino-Russian "strategic relationship," however, is nothing more than a shield against U.S. unilateralism in global affairs. Economic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is largely unbalanced, inasmuch as China, not Russia, has been playing a major role in bilateral trade. It is also worth noting that military and political spheres

of the Sino-Russian relationship are greatly influenced by Russia and China's relations with the United States. The only sphere where Chinese and Russian interests by and large coincide has been foreign policy. The two powers purport to share a vision of a "multipolar world," but as Dittmer (2004: 221) noted, "neither partner shares an ideology or a coherent international vision beyond their endorsement of multipolarity."

As long as the United States remains a dominant power within the strategic triangle, it will be hypothesized, China and Russia will attempt to counterbalance U.S. influence. Thus, the strategic triangle's political dimension remains important for Sino-American, U.S.-Russian, and Russo-Chinese relations alike. The aim of this research is to examine triangular developments during the 1980s-1990s and their implications for the following decades. The paper will also provide insight into the evolution of the Sino-Russian relationship in the 21st century, and the economic data offered by Itoh and Kuchins (2011) and Moshes and Nojonen (2011) will be assessed for the analysis of trends in Sino-Russian economic relations. Moreover, it will be argued that the relations within the strategic triangle are still mainly influenced by the United States' behavior, and China and Russia's cooperation in the world arena should be perceived as a reaction towards U.S. policy.

Literature Review

Although post-Cold War political scientists and historians tend to apply the concept of a strategic triangle in their analyses of triangular relations among world powers (see, for example: Wilborn, 1996; Garver, 2002), such comparisons are oftentimes premature and unrealistic (Pant, 2004: 20). The USA-PRC-USSR strategic triangle, however, proved to be the quintessential example of such a tripolar system. Notwithstanding large amounts of qualitative work on the strategic triangle throughout the 1970s and 1980s (see Gottlieb, 1977; Lieberthal, 1979; Dittmer, 1981), the exact timing of the triangle's emergence remains in doubt. While Hyland (1981: 137) contended that the strategic triangle emerged as a result of the Sino-Soviet feud in the 1960, Dittmer (1981: 485) considered the Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s to be the starting point for triangular politics. Kenneth Liebethal (1979) scrutinized the trends within the strategic triangle in the 1970s, contending that the possibility of influencing the Soviet Union's behavior through U.S.-Chinese relations was the key question for U.S. foreign policy during this period. By the end of the decade, however, the United States lost an ability to use its improved relations with China so as to gain leverage over the Soviet Union. Accordingly, U.S. foreign policy under the Reagan administration

failed to play the “China” card against the USSR, which began to pursue normalization with China in the late 1980s. Russian scholars Voskressenskii (1999) and Galenovich (2001) offered a historical background to the most pressing issues (particularly border concerns) in Sino-Soviet relations during the 1980s and early 1990s. Wishnick (2001a) traced the history of Sino-Russian relations from Brezhnev to Yeltsin and provided a rigorous analysis of the events that caused shifts in relations between China and Russia after the end of the Cold War. Rozman (1998) and Garnett (2001) each presented somewhat skeptical prognosis of the Sino-Russian strategic relationship’s future. Larson and Shevchenko (2010), Wilson (2004), and Bellacqua (2010) covered the post-Cold War relations between China and Russia, while Zhu (2006) offered insight into U.S.-Chinese relations in the 21st century, arguing that China has benefited from U.S.-dominated international system and will likely continue to do so. Dittmer (2004) and Kotkin (2009) have presented the most recent evaluation of the strategic triangle among the United States, Russia, and China. Opining upon the reset in relations between Moscow and Washington, Kotkin argues that “China will retain the upper hand, not only in its bilateral relationship with Russia but also in the strategic triangle comprising China, Russia, and the United States” (Kotkin, 2009). Grant (2012) conducted a comparative study on China and Russia’s attitude towards global governance and discussed the main impediments to Moscow and Beijing’s deeper engagement in global processes (U.S. unilateralism in world affairs and its dominant role in global institutions).

The Sino-Soviet Rapprochement in the Context of Strategic Triangle

It is rarely disputed that enmity and mistrust toward the Soviet Union brought China and the United States together in the 1970s. American diplomacy, actuated in accordance with Henry Kissinger’s realist ideals, sought to play the “China” card in its fight against the Kremlin. The China factor in U.S. foreign policy thus played an important role in calculations about how to manage the United States’ adversary relationship with the Soviet Union (Talbot, 1981: 82). China, for its part, was seeking to pursue normalization with the United States in order to counterweight the Soviet Union. Galenovich (2001) noted that China’s posture vis-à-vis the Kremlin in the 1970s was openly aggressive. Beijing called for creating a joint front against the USSR, ceased to recognise the 1950 treaty of Friendship, Solidarity, and Mutual Assistance, and repeatedly demanded the Soviet Union withdraw its forces from Mongolia, halt assistance to Vietnam, and reduce the troop presence along the Sino-Soviet border (Galenovich, 2001: 1). Beginning in 1979, the first talks between China and the Soviet Union

were terminated when the Soviet Union conducted the invasion of Afghanistan (Hyland, 1981: 138).

In the early 1980s, a shift in the power balance occurred. The Soviet Union's deteriorating relations with the United States, troubled economy, and declining defense capabilities made the Kremlin seek ways of invigorating its relationship with China. At that juncture, the Chinese leadership was discontented with U.S. foreign policy toward the Taiwan issue (i.e. increased contacts and arms sales), U.S. criticism of the human rights situation in China, and Washington's unwillingness to provide industrial technology so coveted by Beijing. The above-mentioned factors played a key role in bringing China and the Soviet Union together after 1985 when the Sino-Soviet rapprochement commenced.

In March 1982, the then Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, in his Tashkent speech opined upon China as a "socialist state" and strongly criticized the U.S. "two China" policy, thus sending a signal to Beijing that Moscow was ready for renewing a dialogue (Wishnick, 2001a: 75). In response to Brezhnev's appeal, the Chinese leadership subsequently announced its determination to conduct "independent foreign policy" aimed at improving relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States without attaching itself to any big power (Goldstein, 1990: 122). As a consequence, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China began a round of talks devoted to the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations and resolution of border disputes. The results of negotiations, albeit not as fruitful as parties had envisioned, had a significant impact on the increased levels of trade between the two nations. The volume of trade, for instance, skyrocketed from \$300 million in 1982 to \$1.2 billion in 1984 (Voskressenskii, 1999: 244). However, three crucial challenges, the so-called "three obstacles," which had been thwarting rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing since the beginning of the 1980s, remained. Beijing still expressed its dissatisfaction with the deployment of Soviet troops along the Sino-Soviet border, the Soviet Union's support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviet leaders Andropov and Chernenko fell short of achieving any substantial progress on these issues largely due to the short tenure of their offices. It was Mikhail Gorbachev who gave impetus to the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations after ascending to the Communist Party's leadership in 1985.

The Soviet response to addressing the "three obstacles" in Sino-Soviet relations was reflected in Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in Vladivostok on July 28, 1986. In his speech, the new Soviet leader signaled his willingness to resolve the main points of contention between

Moscow and Beijing. Gorbachev announced his decision to reduce the number of troops along the Sino-Soviet border and withdraw a considerable part of the Soviet contingent from Mongolia and Afghanistan by the end of the year. The Soviet leader, however, stopped short of giving concessions on the Soviet support of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Only two years later when the Soviet Union began withdrawing forces from Afghanistan, Moscow suggested Hanoi should follow suit (Su, 1989: 115), and in December of that year Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia. Thus, by the end of 1980s China and the Soviet Union made significant progress in overcoming the impasse in the relationship and were gradually moving toward full normalization.

Nevertheless, the two countries had different motives underlying their pursuit of better relations. While China was seeking to establish a peaceful milieu within the strategic triangle in order to focus on its economic development, the Soviet Union sought to restore the ideological nexus between the two communist countries (Voskessenskii, 1999: 247) with an intent to avert a possibility of a two-front conflict, and boost the Soviet economy. During Gorbachev's first visit to China in 1989 for the Sino-Soviet summit in Beijing, Chinese and Soviet leaders reached a mutual understanding on how to improve the Sino-Soviet relations. Accordingly, Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping agreed that the new relationship would be based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, would not be aimed against any third country, and the ideological factor would not play any role in the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations. The aforementioned goals were reflected in the joint Sino-Soviet communiqué of 1989. According to the document, the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China agreed to develop their relations on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence, including respect for international norms such as sovereignty, noninterference, and peaceful resolution of disputes (Wishnick, 2001a: 105). Further, any attempt or action by any country to impose its own will on others and seek "hegemony in any form" would be discarded by Moscow and Beijing.

The end of Sino-American confrontation following the decay of the Soviet Union removed the main rationale behind U.S.-Chinese cooperation, and the image of an opening China was replaced overnight by an image of a defiant China ruled by dictators (Zhu, 2006: 90). A month after the Sino-Soviet summit, the Chinese leadership witnessed a hitherto unseen degree of public discontent. The Tiananmen crackdown sparked harsh criticism from the United States which imposed sanctions against China. The Soviet Union, on the contrary, issued a response stating that the events in China were an internal affair, and suggested

political dialogue as a means to resolve social problems. Besides, it was not in Gorbachev's interests to undermine the overwhelming progress in Sino-Soviet relations achieved during the previous four years of his tenure. Socio-economic problems in the Soviet Union (mass protests in Tbilisi, Georgia and other Soviet republics) also made Gorbachev refrain from open criticism of China's violent quelling of the protests in Beijing. In the final analysis, the events in China made the Soviet leadership consider the consequences of liberalization that had been gaining momentum since the beginning of *perestroika*, while a fragile rapprochement between the two countries after two decades of confrontation dissuaded Gorbachev from taking a more assertive stance towards Beijing. The Soviet Union soon became embroiled in painful process of disintegration, and Sino-Soviet relations were no longer atop the Kremlin's agenda. The Soviet Union and the communist bloc in Eastern Europe subsequently began to unravel.

In sum, the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in the second half of the 1980s was caused by important power shifts within the strategic triangle between the USA, USSR, and PRC. The United States under the Reagan administration was determined to economically exhaust the Soviet Union, thus eliminating it as a major geopolitical threat, while engaging China in order to maintain a strategic advantage in containing the USSR. In light of the worsening economy and political stagnation, the Soviet Union began to reverse its course toward China in the early 1980s for economic, political, and security reasons (Tucker, 1995-96: 518). China, for its part, was also looking forward to resolving disputes with the USSR because of the security threat emanating from the troop presence along the Sino-Soviet border and around China (i.e. Vietnam and Afghanistan). Although the "three obstacles" constantly stymied negotiations between the Soviet Union and China under Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, Sino-Soviet relations began to mend after Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power, and by the end of the 1980s most disputes were resolved.

The normalization of Sino-Soviet relations did not have a long-lasting impact, however, for the Soviet Union and China failed to achieve substantial progress in their economic cooperation. Because Sino-Soviet trade was markedly lower than trade between China and the United States, China considered U.S.-Chinese relations more important. The volume of Sino-Soviet trade amounted to \$2 billion by 1985, whereas Sino-U.S. trade had already reached \$6 billion by 1984 (Mills, 1986: 543). Thus, although the strategic triangle by and large lost its military component after the end of the Cold War, its political and economic implications remained important well into the following decades.

Disruption of the Power Balance: Sino-Russian Relations in the 1990s-2000s

The looming collapse of the Soviet Union was greeted with alarm in Beijing. The Chinese leadership grew increasingly cautious of the political transformation in the Soviet Union, and reacted with criticism to the plans of restoring capitalism in the former communist country. Moreover, China was openly supportive of the putschists (the KGB generals), who attempted to preserve at least the core of the Soviet Union by carrying out a coup in August 1991. After Boris Yeltsin quelled the *putsch*, Beijing accused Russia's new leader of dismantling the socialist system, damaging nascent Sino-Russian relations (Wishnick, 2001a: 122). Yet, in spite of mounting ideological differences between China and the Soviet Union, relations between countries were expanding in 1990 and 1991.

During the Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng's visit to Moscow in April 1990, the Soviet Union and China signed a number of agreements on mutual cooperation in the spheres of border security, economics, science and technology, and peaceful use and research of space (Xia, 1997: 24). The most important among them was the agreement on guiding principles of mutual and balanced force reductions and confidence-building measures along the Sino-Soviet border. According to this agreement, China and the Soviet Union expressed their commitment to reduce their troop presence to the lowest level in the area of the Sino-Soviet border, which would pave the way for good neighborly relations based upon mutual security (Yuan, 1998: 8). Further, during Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in May 1991, Moscow and Beijing made significant progress on border issues. Mikhail Gorbachev and Jiang Zemin signed an agreement on the "Eastern Section of the Sino-Soviet Border," which settled 98 per cent of the 7,400 km border stretching from Russia's Vladivostok to Eastern Tajikistan in the Central Asia (Moltz, 1995: 516). Under this agreement, China also received once fought for Zhenbao (Damansky) Island and was allowed free navigation on the Amur River. However, further progress on border-related issues was disrupted by the dissolution of the Soviet Union following the signing of the Belavezha accords in December 1991.

The new leadership of Russia became more focused on forging closer ties with the West, and with the United States in particular, rather than with authoritarian China or the former Soviet Republics, which Russia nevertheless considered its exclusive sphere of interests. Russian foreign policy thus prioritised Moscow's adherence to democratic values, pluralist institutions, and respect for human rights. This Western-centrism in Russian foreign policy making pioneered by Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev in the first part of the

1990s could be defined as quixotic, for it expected Russia to be accepted as an equal by Western countries (despite its lack of geopolitical power) and deemed emphasis on relations with China tantamount to the rejection of Western values and identities (Lo, 2002: 23). Although Wilson (2004: 192) argued that Russia's new political elite was largely uninformed and uninterested in China, the new leadership nonetheless deemed Sino-Russian relations necessary and, therefore, did not fully discard them.

By the end of 1992, the Kremlin's pro-Western sentiment gradually began to subside in light of growing U.S. influence in global affairs, especially during the Gulf War in Iraq, and internal opposition to the Kremlin's pro-Western foreign policy. In response to the above-mentioned concerns, during his first visit to China in December 1992, President Boris Yeltsin proclaimed that Russia was seeking balanced relations in both Europe and Asia, admitted common interests between Moscow and Beijing, and also noted that the Taiwan issue was primarily China's internal affair (Rozman, 1998: 400). For its part, China sought to establish better relations with Russia due to the growing diplomatic isolation and sanctions levied against Beijing in the aftermath of the Tiananmen upheaval. Furthermore, China considered the Sino-Russian relationship a counterweight to American influence and a partnership, which would subsequently give way to a multipolar world (Wishnick, 2001b: 800). Thus, the desire to shape a new international order based on multipolarity as opposed to U.S. hegemonism resonated with Beijing and Moscow alike. In his 1994 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev accordingly maintained: "The international order in the 21st century will not be a *Pax Americana* or any other version of unipolar or bipolar dominance. The United States does not have the capability to rule alone ... the nature of modern international problems calls for solutions on a multilateral basis" (Kozyrev, 1994).

During Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in September 1994, Russia and China signed a joint communiqué, which defined the Sino-Russian relationship as a new "constructive partnership" based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, equality, good-neighborliness, friendship, mutually beneficial cooperation, and nonalignment. Further, the 1994 communiqué reaffirmed the parties' commitment to the United Nations as a mechanism for creating a multipolar world order; their mutual respect for each other as major powers; their intolerance for expansionism; and ultimately, their opposition to hegemony, power politics, and the establishment of antagonistic political, military, and economic blocs (Wilson, 2004: 147). This joint declaration reflected Moscow and Beijing's shared concerns over the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) eastwards in particular, and the

U.S. role as a global hegemon in general. During the summit in 1994, the two presidents also signed an agreement on the demarcation of the Western part of the Sino-Russian border and expressed their willingness to increase interregional economic cooperation. In June 1995, China's Premier Li Peng attended the second Sino-Russian summit in Moscow, where the Chinese Prime Minister and his Russian counterpart Viktor Chernomyrdin confirmed their mutual support, commitment to maintaining regional stability and cooperating in global affairs. This meeting coincided with deterioration of Russia and China's relations with the United States caused by Taiwanese President Lee Tenghui's visit to the United States and Western criticism of the military intervention in Chechnya (Wishnick, 2001a: 128).

Thus, once again, a power shift in the strategic triangle caused by the U.S. aggressive foreign policy brought China and Russia together in the second half of the 1990s. This period saw a dramatic change in Russian foreign policy and Sino-Russian relations alike. In January 1996, Evgenii Primakov was appointed as Russia's new Minister of Foreign Affairs. This decision was widely perceived as a reorientation of Russian foreign policy toward the East, and namely China and India (Pant, 2004: 21). Unlike his pro-Western predecessor Kozyrev, Yevgenii Primakov, a geopolitically savvy adherent of orientalism and Eurasianism, held that Russia must reassert its interests in Asia and in the Middle East and focus more on developing multilateral cooperation with the former Soviet Republics (Wishnick, 2001a: 800). Like Chinese leaders, Yevgenii Primakov was a staunch advocate for a multipolar world, in which, according to his vision, no country would play a dominant role. The second half of the decade was marked by Russia's reassessment of its geopolitical role in the world, which policymakers in the Kremlin started to associate more with the East rather than West after Moscow's failed rapprochement with the United States.

In April 1996, Russian president Boris Yeltsin and his Chinese counterpart, Jiang Zemin, signed a joint communiqué, which proclaimed a "strategic partnership" between Russia and China and marked a new stage of partnership between Moscow and Beijing directed towards strategic cooperation in the 21st century. The two presidents reiterated their determination to seek a multipolar world and stressed that the new partnership would not be aimed at any third country. Nonetheless, given U.S. assertive policy toward the Taiwan issue and NATO expansion, Moscow and Beijing considered this "strategic relationship" an effective mechanism to counter U.S. power in the world. Furthermore, during the summit, Chinese and Russian leaders announced an ultimate goal of increasing trade toward \$20 billion by the end of the century and identified energy, nuclear power, and large-scale

construction as priorities for both sides (Garnett, 2001: 46). Besides, in April 1996, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed the Shanghai agreement, which addressed such issues as confidence-building measures along the shared borders between states, and exchange of information on military exercises. A year later, significant progress was made on the reduction of troops along China's border with the former Soviet countries after the signing of a five-party agreement in April 1997.

During the 1997 Sino-Russian summit in Moscow, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin again emphasized their shared goal of establishing a multipolar world in a "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order" (Buszynski, 2010: 266). However, rhetoric aside, as China's prospects for cooperation with the United States increased, Beijing's reasons for strengthening relations with Moscow reached their limit (Rozman, 1998: 404). Moreover, economic relations between China and Russia, lagged far behind political achievements. Despite pledges to achieve the level of \$20 billion in bilateral trade, both countries fell significantly short of attaining this objective (level of \$20 billion was surpassed only in 2004). Accordingly, in 1997, only 5 per cent of Russia's exports flowed to China, and only 2.5 per cent of Chinese exports went to Russia. The prospects of joint Sino-Russian energy projects were overshadowed by the economic crisis in Russia as late of 1998. By the end of the 1990s, bilateral trade between Russia and China was in a steady decline.

Sino-Russian Relations after the Cold War

The period from March 1999 to September 2001 was marked by new, hitherto unseen challenges in the international environment for Moscow, Beijing, and Washington alike. During this period, China and Russia had the strongest common interests and the greatest need for cooperation (Cheng, 2009: 152). Accordingly, two crucial factors paved the way for the Sino-Russian rapprochement at the beginning of the new millennium: (1) U.S. aggressive foreign policy and (2) political change in Russia. First, U.S. military strikes against Iraq and increasing American presence in the Central Asia; plans for creation of U.S.-Japanese Theater Missile Defense (TMD) and National Missile Defense (NMD); NATO expansion into the Baltics; and, ultimately, bombing of Yugoslavia, during which the Chinese embassy in Belgrade had been destroyed. All these developments reflected Moscow and Beijing's concerns over growing American influence, inasmuch as many of the above-mentioned events directly affected Russia and China's spheres of national interest. Second, Russia's new leader, former Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, started to pursue a course aimed, *inter alia*, at working

towards a multipolar system of international relations and creating a favorable environment for Russia's economic development upon assuming the presidency in 2000. One of the main tenets of Putin's foreign policy, delineated in the Foreign Policy Concept of June 28, 2000, was maintaining good-neighborly relations with the country's neighbors, and Russia's relationship with China (on a par with India) was defined as "one of the most important" directions of Russian foreign policy in Asia (Leksyutina, 2010).

In July 2000, Vladimir Putin paid his first official visit to Beijing, where Russian President and his Chinese counterpart issued a joint communiqué, "the Beijing Declaration," on the Anti-Ballistic Missile problem. In light of Washington's plans of withdrawing from the ABM Treaty signed between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1972, Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin China confirmed their strong opposition to the U.S. plans of deploying missile systems and agreed upon the essence of the U.S. National Missile Defense and Theater Missile Defense programs, which, according to the parties, was to seek "unilateral military and security advantages" (Wilson, 2004: 161). One year later, during Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in July 2001, Russia and China signed a historical agreement, the "Treaty for Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation," under which Moscow and Beijing agreed to develop long-term relations of friendship and equal partnership. Furthermore, the Treaty prioritized strengthening confidence in the military area and enhancing security between countries, while providing framework for moving towards a more stable regional and international environment. Under the pact, Moscow and Beijing expressed their will to uphold the strict observance of generally recognized principles and norms of international law against any actions aimed at exerting pressure or meddling in the internal affairs of the sovereign states. In addition, Russia and China agreed to develop mutually beneficial cooperation in trade, military, energy, transportation, scientific and technical spheres, and other fields. Ultimately, the parties to the Treaty voiced their determination to fight terrorism, separatism, extremism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal migration in the following twenty years.

Another significant achievement in Sino-Russian relations during this period was the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in June 2001. Building upon the Shanghai agreement of 1996, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan along with the new member, Uzbekistan, further consolidated their relations by setting up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with the declared objectives of strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation

among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order (Bailes et al., 2007).

Despite increasing cooperation between Moscow and Beijing resulting in the new Sino-Russian Treaty and the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, both agreements lost their tremendous significance, albeit for a short period of time, in the wake of the post-9/11 realignment in global politics (Kutchins, 2010: 41). After the collision of U.S. and Chinese planes in April 2001, increased arms sales to Taiwan, and U.S. President George W. Bush's remarks about defending Taiwan by all means, Sino-U.S. relations reached their nadir prior to the 9/11 events. Likewise, U.S.-Russian relations exacerbated after the "espionage" scandal in early 2001, and were further damaged by plans of the NATO enlargement and U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty. For these reasons, the improvement of relations with the United States was on top of China and Russia's foreign policy agendas in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States. Accordingly, both countries sought to take advantage of the momentum in order to improve their relations with Washington during this period, but Russia even more so.

After Vladimir Putin supported the United States in its efforts to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan, Russia's President expected Washington to provide more room for negotiation on such divisive issues in bilateral relations as the second round of NATO expansion and termination of the ABM Treaty. However, just like at the beginning of the 1990s, Russia's "honeymoon" with the United States appeared to be short-lived: the Bush Administration provided too little in return for the Kremlin's support. China, for its part, also sought to resuscitate its relations with the United States after September 11. During the informal summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Shanghai in October 2001, President George W. Bush and Jiang Zemin reiterated that both countries attached great importance to Sino-U.S. ties, vowed to work together to build a constructive relationship, and agreed to establish long and medium-term mechanisms for combating terrorism (Mao, 2003: 85). Nonetheless, the U.S. invasion in Iraq in 2003, spread of the "color revolutions" into the post-Soviet states, and the third round of NATO expansion in Europe made Moscow rethink its approach to relations with the United States and focus on further developing of the "strategic relationship" with China.

During Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing in October 2004, Russia and China concluded the supplementary agreement on the Eastern section of the Sino-Russian border, which was subsequently ratified by the countries' parliaments in 2005. Furthermore, during this summit, Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao approved the implementation guidelines of the Sino-Russian Treaty of 2001 for the next four years (Cheng, 2009: 161). Subsequently, in July 2005, the Chinese and Russian leaders issued a joint communiqué on the "International Order in the 21st Century," which reaffirmed the common goals of working toward a multipolar world previously stated by Moscow and Beijing.

During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Astana summit in 2005, Russia and China along with four Central Asian states released a declaration, which declared that "a rational and just world order must be based upon consolidation of mutual trust and good-neighborly relations with no pretense to monopoly and domination in international affairs" (Bailes et al., 2007). Russia and China participated in joint military exercises under the SCO's Peace Missions in 2005 and 2007, which were aimed at combining efforts at preventing a possible ethnic conflict in a third country and countering terrorism (Wishnick, 2009: 20). However, in light of the Georgian crisis and ensuing split of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, China did not express support for Russian policy toward Georgia due to dangerous ramifications of the of the republics' cessation. During the presidential meeting in Dushanbe following the Russian-Georgian conflict, China's Hu Jintao expressed his concern to Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev about the conflict and voiced his hope that the disputing parties would be able to resolve the conflict through dialogue and consultation (Yuan, 2011: 12). Nonetheless, Moscow's recognition of the breakaway regions was not welcomed by Beijing due to its concerns over the Taiwan issue and separatist movement in Xinjiang.

The Sino-Russian Relationship in the 21st Century

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia and China have been the only permanent U.N. Security Council members, whose political systems are undemocratic (Grant, 2012: 16). This is one of the main reasons why China and Russia cooperate on a wide range of international issues in an effort to counterbalance the United States and other Western countries. However, there is one important difference in these countries' statuses in global affairs. China's increasing role in world politics is widely associated with its extraordinary economic growth, whereas Russia's assertive posture in the international arena stems from Moscow's nostalgia of its

former superpower status and relatively high energy prices, which allowed the Kremlin to salvage its faltering economy after 2000 (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010: 64). Thus, internal weaknesses and fears of U.S. power make Russia and China hold similar positions on many global issues. Moscow and Beijing remain strongly committed to the principle of noninterference in internal affairs of sovereign states mainly due to domestic problems and regional separatism. Further, both countries maintain relations with the pariah states, including North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Myanmar, and Syria, and object to Western sanctions against these regimes. For instance, in 2005, China and Russia blocked U.S. sanctions against Myanmar the Security Council, labeling such efforts as “meddling in internal affairs.” The same held true for China and Russia’s position on sanctions against Burma (2007), Sri Lanka (2009), Zimbabwe (2008), and, most lately, Syria (2012). With regard to regional affairs, Russia and China cooperate on trade and security issues within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but the latter is far from being considered a substantive body, in part, due to disputes between Moscow and Beijing over leadership in the organization (Scheineson, 2009).

The economic partnership between Moscow and Beijing remains the weakest aspect of bilateral relations. Although the volume of bilateral trade has been growing steadily throughout the previous decade reaching \$60 billion in 2010, it is still far below its potential. One of the reasons underlying slow progress in establishing closer economic ties between Russia and China is the difference in patterns of economic growth. Accordingly, the strengthening of Russian national currency and a rise in international energy and raw material prices fueled Russia’s economic growth in the 2000s. These developments had a positive impact on Sino-Russian economic relations (Moshes and Nojonen, 2011: 43). However, bilateral trade during 1996-2010 was marked by the decrease in Russia’s exports of machinery and transport equipment from 17.7 per cent to 1.3 per cent, whereas exports of raw materials to China increased from 7.1 per cent to 20.6 per cent. By contrast, China’s exports of machinery and transport equipment increased from 5.7 per cent in 1996 to 35.4 per cent in 2010, while manufactured goods started to constitute 18.6 per cent of China’s exports to Russia as opposed to 7 per cent in 1996. Despite the fact that Sino-Russian trade has been growing remarkably in the last decade (Itoh and Kuchins, 2011), the above-mentioned economic disparity in trade capacities raises grave anxieties that Russia is gradually becoming a “junior partner” in Sino-Russian economic relations, or a natural resource appendage (*pridatok*) to China (Kutchins, 2010: 33). Russia’s exports of energy resources to China are

likely to either remain on the same level or may even increase in light of Russia's inability to reform its economic structure and China's growing demand for natural resources.

Conclusions

The strategic triangle among the United States, China, and the Soviet union has undergone a host of vicissitudes throughout the last four decades of the Cold War, culminating in a unipolar world order based on U.S. dominance in international relations. The collapse of the power balance within the triangular system in 1991 had a consequential impact on Sino-Russian relations and U.S.-Chinese relations alike. As regards the U.S.-Russian relationship in the new millennium, both powers attempted to forge closer ties with China, albeit not simultaneously, when relations between Washington and Moscow deteriorated. By the end of the 1990s China and Russia began to express their dissatisfaction with U.S. unilateralism, and such a stance was reflected in the countries' shared vision of a multipolar world and the concept of the "strategic relationship directed towards the 21st century." Despite grandiose proclamations of the "strategic partnership," shared vision of a multipolar world, and increased diplomatic cooperation, Sino-Russian relations are utterly lacking in substance. Much like during the Cold War, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing is based upon counterbalancing the United States in global politics, for cleavages within the strategic triangle among the three powers have generally led to the reorientation of China and Russia's foreign policies in the 1990s and late 2000s.

In so far as economic relations between Moscow and Beijing are concerned, notwithstanding increased economic interaction, neither country truly regards another as a strategic partner. Russia still considers its relations with the European Union indispensable, while the United States remains priority for China (Kotkin, 2009). This configuration is unlikely to change in the future: besides military hardware and natural resources, there is little Russia can offer to its "strategic partner." Likewise, most joint projects between Russia and China are aimed at enhancing energy cooperation through building oil and gas pipelines in Central Asia. Given the resource-oriented model of Russia's economy, Moscow will likely remain China's resource and weapons supplier for decades to come. China, for its part, has been using its "strategic" alliance with Russia as "strategic" leverage vis-à-vis Washington. Diplomatic cooperation with Moscow has helped China promote the idea of multipolarity as it relates to Beijing's national interests. It can be assumed that China's relationship with Russia will become irrelevant as soon as China becomes an independent power in global affairs.

This, in all likelihood, will mark the end of the “strategic” partnership between the two powers, paving the way for U.S.-China rivalry.

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