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Russia, China, India: A New Strategic Triangle for a New Cold War?

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Russia's inability to impede the eastward expansion of NATO and its frustration over NATO's unilateral military action in Kosovo have forced Moscow to seek closer strategic understanding with China and India. While Yevgeny Primakov's controversial reference to a "strategic triangle" among Russia, China, and India might not materialize, it is a fact that each of these states is involved in a somewhat similar dynamic. Each is consolidating its relationship with the others, while also expanding its relations with the United States. In terms of strategic payoffs, this partnership will yield them, at a minimum, enhanced benefits of bilateral cooperation with each other and, at a maximum, it can serve to circumscribe US influence. This potential partnership is a blueprint for the next Cold War and poses a threat that could affect the lives of everyone in the United States in a significant way. This article discusses the motivation for a triangular strategic partnership among Russia, China, and India, the challenges to US international strategy resulting from such a partnership, and suggestions for avoiding a return to the days of Cold War tensions.

Of course any speculation about future international relations must be made with caution in the weeks and months after the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon. At this writing, it is unclear what will be the full course of the US retaliation for those acts of terror, and how other nations around the globe will ultimately respond.

Motivation for an Alliance

Joint opposition to Western dominance is one motivation for a Russia-China-India strategic partnership. NATO enlargement, as well as the West's renewed strategic interest in the southern republics of the former USSR, became a new powerful catalyst for Russia's move eastward. In November 1995, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev warned that in response to NATO's planned eastward expansion, Russia would also turn to its east to seek new allies.[1] It was conceived in Moscow that the strengthening of ties with China would lead to the formation of a new balance of power in Asia that could be advantageous to Russia. Plans were made for a strategic partnership not only with China, but also with India and Iran. One of the goals of such an alliance would be to prevent the West from gaining a foothold in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The progress reached in Russian-Chinese-Indian relations in recent years cannot be attributed purely to their joint opposition to a unipolar, US-dominated world. Such an approach would be simplistic and would underestimate the great potential for complementary ties--military, economic, political, and cultural--among the three neighbors sharing more than 4,000 kilometers of common border.

Operation Allied Force spurred Russia and India to consolidate their friendship further, with the two countries signing a Declaration of Strategic Partnership and other agreements of importance during the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to India in the first week of October 2000. Military technical cooperation, joint research and development, and training constitute the main aspects of the strategic partnership. This partnership brings Russia and India another step closer to a triangular strategic alliance with China.[2] India and Russia pledged to work together for the establishment of a multipolar world based on the sovereign equality of all states. The two sides expressed their "determined opposition to the unilateral use or threat of use of force in violation of the UN Charter, and to intervention in the internal affairs of other states, including under the guise of humanitarian intervention." [3] This reflected the general unease in the international community about NATO's war on Yugoslavia and the economic blockade against Iraq.

Military sales play a prominent role in the relationship. During 1990-1996, India's arms purchases from Russia totaled \$3.5 billion (US); the average annual arms trade approximates \$800 million. Russia has recently committed itself to supplying India with 50 Su-30 multifunctional fighters and has agreed that a modified version of the plane would be produced by an Indian enterprise. India also will be receiving advanced T-90 tanks, three frigates, a submarine, the S-300 anti-missile air-defense system, as well as a heavy aircraft carrier.[4] Moscow seems to be more relaxed about offering military technologies to India than to China. An idea of the staggering Russian influence on Indian defense procurement is provided by the following statistics: About 60 percent of the Indian army's military hardware is Russian-made, while 70 percent of naval hardware and 80 percent of air force hardware is Russian-made or of Russian origin.[5]

The importance of arms exports for the survival and operation of the Russian defense industry cannot be overstated. While domestic defense procurements comprise between 10 and 15 percent of all Russian defense production, India and China together receive 75 to 80 percent of all Russian arms exports.[6] Russia not only gains commercially from major arms transfers, but also acquires leverage regarding future arms sales as well as greater political and strategic engagement with the recipient states.

Economic and trade cooperation between Russia and China has made headway, although it has not met the goals set by the two. Food and consumer goods that flow into Russia via the border trade with China are essential to residents in Siberia and the Far Eastern region. On the other hand, abundant oil and gas resources in Russia are very attractive to China, which has come to depend on imported oil. However, arms supplies continue to dominate Russia's exports to China. Over the past five years the scale of Russian arms exports to China has more than tripled and now accounts for up to one third of the annual trade turnover--and almost 70 percent of China's arms purchases in the foreign market.[7] For Russia, China is the largest weapons market, with 30 to 40 percent of Russia's total arms sales going there.[8] In 1991-1997, China purchased some \$6 billion worth of arms from Russia.[9]

Russia and China have discussed the possibility of developing a joint missile defense system if the United States ignores their objection and goes ahead with a national anti-missile shield. The related prospect of developing a joint regional missile shield was discussed during the January 2000 visit to Moscow of Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov's talks in Beijing in February 2000. Russia has offered to help China develop a manned space program and has allowed Beijing to use its Glonass global satellite navigation system for various purposes, including the pointing of precision weapons.[10]

Russia and China also have sympathized, supported, and cooperated with each other on international and regional matters. Russia supports China on the issues of Taiwan and Tibet, refusing to back Western pressure on China with regard to human rights. China supports Russian efforts to contain domestic separatism, including Moscow's actions in Chechnya, and recognizes, for the time being at least, Russia's leading role in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

As multi-ethnic states, all three nations are concerned about the prospects of growing ethnic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism in the region. For Russia, Central Asia has become a volatile southern perimeter and home to ten million ethnic Russians. For China, Central Asia is now an unpredictable zone from which Turkic nationalism and Islamic ideology could radiate into Xinjiang. Russia and China now see NATO and radical Islam as more of a threat than each other. At their meeting in Astana on 30 March 2000 the defense ministers of the Shanghai Five (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) addressed the issues of separatism and international terrorism in the context of developments in Chechnya, Xinjiang, and Afghanistan, which Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev called "a headache" for all five states.[11] At this writing, again, it is not yet clear how these states will ultimately support or oppose US actions in response to the September 2001 terrorist strikes in New York and on the Pentagon, whether against Afghanistan or elsewhere.

This common concern, however, has prompted Moscow to look for allies in restraining the Islamic resurgence in Central Asia. India and China are perceived by Moscow as the two most like-minded partners with regard to the emerging Islamic challenge. The proposed Russia-India-China strategic triangle is therefore targeted not only against Western dominance, but also has a strong anti-Islamic dimension as well. South Asia, still perceived in Moscow primarily through the prism of India, continues to be part of Russia's broader Asian policies. Russia is interested in the

development of cooperation between India and the Central Asian states, as a means of counterbalancing the influence in Central Asia of neighboring Islamic countries, as well as that of the United States and other Western countries. India, for its part, is concerned to counter the influence of its arch-rival, Pakistan, in Central Asia, believing that Islamabad's close links with Central Asia would enable Pakistan to acquire strategic depth in any future war against India.[12]

Anti-US Sentiments Fuel Partnership

There have been signs that the Russo-Chinese partnership is acquiring stronger anti-US undertones. Prior to the terrorist strikes on the United States, China had become more vociferous in its opposition to NATO expansion, and Moscow had toughened its attitude to the US military presence in the region and the US-Japan security alliance. During Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev's visit to China in October 1998, Moscow and Beijing stressed their common approach to three international issues: they "categorically" objected to NATO expansion to the east, denounced the use of force in the Kosovo settlement, and disapproved the US-Japan plans of establishing an anti-missile defense system.[13] This was a departure from the earlier situation when China was rather indifferent to NATO enlargement, while former Defense Minister Igor Rodionov used to say that US-Japan security interaction "does not cause concerns."

China has been disturbed by the involvement of Central Asian countries in NATO's Partnership for Peace and their joint military exercises. Similarly, Russia has become more critical of US-Japan security plans. It has called their close-range anti-ballistic missile system project a destabilizing factor for the existing balance of forces that could impede the process of the reduction in strategic arms. Both China and Russia argue they have no choice but to draw closer to counterbalance US dominance. "NATO is being turned into a global organization. So it is necessary to turn other countries into our allies," says senior Russian diplomat Yuli Vorontsov.[14]

Russia, China, and India Overcome Friction in their Relations

The Russia-China partnership has clearly helped to foster bilateral relations after more than two decades of tension and hostility. This partnership has also enhanced the international standing of both countries. At the same time, however, political trust is still rather weak. Moscow and particularly the Russian Far East are clearly worried that the further economic decline of that region will lead to its abandoning by Russians and even Chinese occupation.

China is not perceived by the majority of Russian experts as an immediate military threat, because it is not expected to close the gap with Russia in nuclear and conventional weapons anytime soon.[15] However, more and more Russian commentators, including in the military, are worried about the consequences for Russia of arming China with sophisticated Russian weapons while the Russian army itself cannot afford to have them.

Russia's growing political, economic, and military dependence on China has provoked a certain alarm and anxiety in Russia's academic and political circles. Alexei Bogaturov believes that in spite of impressive rapprochement, Russia and China remain countries that have historically been in conflict and that the geopolitical source of the conflict has not been removed or reduced. Hence, he argues against attempts to pick China as an ally or key partner in the region.[16] Such views are not rare in Russia, even among government officials, in spite of a general official euphoria and an informal taboo on anti-Chinese comments. Common views toward US politics and close military cooperation may not be enough to sustain and enhance the "strategic partnership" between Russia and China. To make it complete, the two countries will have to get rid of their traditional suspicion of each other and engage in a stable and long-term economic cooperation.

The relationship between India and China also has an important influence on the character of regional order and significant geopolitical implications. Friction in this bilateral relationship could have direct effects on China's relations with other neighbors. Stable and cooperative relations between India and China build trust and contribute to Beijing's own sense of security and confidence, providing a counterbalance should other important relationships deteriorate.[17]

The near-rapprochement of relations (driven by the mutual consensus that economic development should have priority) between India and China diffuses, but does not dispel, three decades of friction. Four of the five primary causes of disquiet in India-China relations have been addressed by both powers: India's values-driven Tibet policy has ceased;

Chinese support for secessionist insurgents in Assam and the North East has been withdrawn; the collapse of the Soviet Union reduces Chinese fears of a containment-driven strategic nexus; and, most important, tensions stemming from border disputes between India and China are addressed, though not resolved, through the negotiation of confidence-building measures and agreements. The principal friction in contemporary relations between New Delhi and Beijing is India's belief (apparently well-founded) that China provides nuclear-related military technology and hardware to Pakistan. This abrasion is compartmentalized from India's overall bilateral relationship with Beijing. (New Delhi may be reassured by China's decision to join, and work constructively with, the Non-Proliferation Treaty Exporters Committee [or Zangger Committee].) New Delhi's preference for longer-term prudence in its relationship with China is one consequence of China's military nuclear exports to Pakistan.[18]

India's approach to the management of tensions with China offers important lessons for other regional actors in how to manage relations (especially on sensitive issues) with China. New Delhi has handled Beijing more successfully than Washington has during the corresponding period. India and China have established and maintained regular reciprocal high-level personal visits between political leaders. Both states have improved trade relations and take care to compartmentalize intractable issues that continue to irritate long-standing tensions. Such a policy has perhaps returned dividends of its own with China in turn assuming a "position of 'careful neutrality' on Kashmir." [19] In contrast to recent US policy on China, India takes care to respect the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of another state and eschews a values-driven foreign policy. These developments are especially significant given the depth of India's embedded longer-term strategic concerns with China and the record of mutual tension that has only eased in recent years. India's democratic status also may make it an attractive partner to those East Asian states condemned by the United States for abusing human rights or for falling short of democratic standards.

The renewed Russian-Indian strategic partnership, fueled by common concern regarding Islamic revivalism, has thwarted Moscow's initial intention to follow a more balanced policy in South Asia, improving in particular its relations with Pakistan. Instead, Moscow-Islamabad links have further deteriorated, especially because of the latter's pro-Taliban role in Afghanistan prior to recent events. Moscow's strategic interest in India motivates Moscow to promote India's inclusion into the leading forums and institutions of the Asia-Pacific. Having become a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization, Moscow is now backing New Delhi's bid for membership in this regional body. During consultations with the Indian Foreign Ministry in November 1998, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin noted that "Russia will try its best to help India develop ties with APEC and eventually to join the organization." [20]

Although Russia and India have renounced an openly anti-Chinese policy, both countries continue to share suspicion and fear toward China. In spite of Moscow's public denunciation of India's nuclear tests in 1998, Russia appreciates India's concern about adequate military preparation in case of Chinese aggression. Moscow supports India not only morally, but also through the resumption of arms supplies, which, after a brief pause in the early 1990s, have been steadily increasing.

Challenges to US International Strategy

Some US officials admit that closer ties between Moscow and Beijing are cause for concern. They say, at the very least, debates are more complicated now on the UN Security Council, where Russia and China frequently make common cause against interventionist initiatives favored by the United States and Britain. Deadlock on the UN Security Council reminiscent of the Cold War era is becoming a regular occurrence.[21] For instance, knowing that both Russia and China would probably veto military intervention in Kosovo, the Clinton Administration decided to work through NATO. Both Moscow and Beijing were concerned about external intervention on humanitarian grounds, which would be relevant to conflicts within Russia such as Chechnya, and within China such as its claims over Taiwan. Further, NATO was again conspiring to force the US value system on a Third World state.[22]

Russia, China, and India watched the United States in conflicts throughout the 1990s and each learned the same lessons. Indian military and political sources were among the first to react to the Kosovo operation and to speculate on preliminary lessons to be learned.[23] "We are studying what's going on there [in Kosovo] and drawing our lessons from it." [24] A common theme in Indian, Russian, and Chinese thinking since Operation Desert Storm has been the importance of "force multipliers" provided by information technology, AWACs, mid-air refueling, unmanned aerial

vehicles, and electronic warfare capabilities. Analysts in all three countries believe their armed forces can succeed against a high-technology foe if they use these force multipliers in combination with clever low-technology tactics, urban guerilla warfare, financial terrorism, computer hacking, media warfare, diplomatic actions, and psychological warfare.[25]

In light of the new "interventionist-oriented NATO doctrine" and the new capabilities of long-range precision conventional weapons, Indian military thinkers recommend upgrading its nuclear arms to deter Western intimidation and attack. This is a prime example of the drive toward nuclear weapons and its cascading effects predicted by General Makmut Gareyev, President of the Russian Academy of Military Science. He believes that countries, including Russia, that are unable to match an opponent in high-technology conventional weapons will resort to nuclear weapons in order to deter conventional strikes.[26] Until 1998, India held the principled position that nuclear deterrence was abhorrent to human sentiment, since it implies that if required to defend its own existence, a state will act with pitiless disregard for the consequences of its own and its adversary's people. But in remarks made on 15 March 1999, Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee asserted: "The nuclear weapon is not an offensive weapon. It is a weapon of self-defense. It is the kind of weapon that helps in preserving peace. If in the days of the Cold War there was no use of force, it was because of the balance of terror." [27] It is also true that India has begun revamping its conventional forces to push the nuclear threshold upward, creating more options with those conventional forces before resorting to nuclear weapon use.[28]

In his article titled, "Nuclear Shadows on High Tech Warfare," Major General Wu Jianguo, former associate professor and dean of the Antichemical Warfare Academy, sums up the Chinese view of its nuclear capability: "When countries possessing nuclear weapons and high-tech conventional weapons are involved in a war in which the conflict is intensifying, the possible use of nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. Nuclear weapons, therefore, are still a trump card in the hands of nuclear nations." [29]

Many scenarios that would present a challenge to the United States could arise from the triangular strategic partnership. One possible conflict scenario is that of China and Taiwan. This is a possible conflict for several reasons. First, China is going through an economic modernization. This is good over the long run for encouraging political liberty. In the short run, however, as large state-owned enterprises are disestablished, the Chinese may have unemployment of millions to tens of millions and social and political disruption of one kind or another. For thousands of years dictators have responded to domestic problems by playing the nationalism card and focusing attention on a foreign enemy or foreign problem. Taiwan will be front and center because now it is a thriving, prosperous, free-enterprise democracy. Taiwan inescapably disproves those people in Southeast Asia and in the PRC who have said for years that Asians do not have an aptitude for democracy and need to be ruled with a firm hand. Taiwan is an affront to the leaders in Beijing the same way Poland's Solidarity movement in the summer of 1989 was an affront to the leaders in the Kremlin and the dictators in Eastern Europe. The Taiwan Strait is one of the most likely places over the next five to ten years where the United States might end up in a clear confrontation with another nuclear power.

How would such a conflict evolve? Top echelons of the PLA officer corps do not necessarily share a common point of view with regard to Taiwan, and the advice they give is not necessarily militaristic.[30] However, a Western intelligence source surmises that high-ranking naval and air force officers support a militant stance in Taiwan.[31] They, rather than the ground forces, have received the benefits of increases in the defense budget and are eager to test their new capabilities.[32]

Beijing is not likely to haphazardly lob a few missiles over to Taiwan and see what happens. Beijing would have a plan and expect to win. The more probable scenario would be for the Chinese to effect simultaneous crises to distract the United States, forcing the Americans to choose between Taiwan and another ally. This quote from Chinese ultra-nationalist author He Xing lends credence to the "simultaneous crises" theory:

China must pay close attention to those countries that are opposed to American interests, or are potential strategic enemies. It must be borne in mind that the enemies of enemies are one's own allies. . . . Know this: the more the United States encounters trouble in other places in the world, the more difficult it is for it to concentrate its power on dealing with China and the greater the opportunities for China's existence and development.[33]

Hypothetically, Beijing might cooperate with Moscow on the timing of an attack on Taiwan. Moscow could simultaneously start a conflict with emerging democracies in the Baltics or the Caucasus. Or Beijing and New Delhi could cooperate on timing, with India engaging Pakistan, perhaps with the support of Moscow. Both Russia and China are arming other enemies of the United States such as Iran and Iraq.[34] Iraq could be persuaded by Beijing or Moscow to simultaneously start a conflict with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or Israel. China could concurrently attack Taiwan and stop the food flow to North Korea, forcing millions of refugees into South Korea, and causing the United States to choose between helping Taiwan and assisting South Korea.

The possibility of a nuclear dimension to a conflict between China and Taiwan is all too real. On 2 December 1998, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that the PLA had conducted exercises that included simulated nuclear missile attacks on Taiwan and on US military forces in the region. DIA analysts determined that the missile units were conducting mock nuclear attacks on Taiwan and against US Army troops based in South Korea. US marines on the Japanese island of Okinawa and mainland Japan also were targeted.[35] The missile exercise directly threatened the 37,000 troops based in South Korea and the 47,000 troops in Japan, including about 25,000 marines on Okinawa.[36] All of these China-Taiwan scenario options are conjecture, but they are not beyond the realm of possibility and are worth considering. That may be particularly so in the aftermath of the terrorist strikes on the United States on 11 September 2001 and the US response. The volatility of the current situation calls into question many of our previous assumptions about stability and the likely course of international and regional relations.

Preventing Another Cold War

A strategic partnership among China, Russia, and India is a blueprint for the next Cold War. What can we in the United States do to avert a return to the days of superpower tensions? This is a difficult question to answer, but the following concepts would seem to have promise:

- Build a multinational missile defense network that would protect everyone involved against attacks or accidental launches.
- Ensure that the US military is strong and that we have an effective national security posture in the Pacific.
- Explicitly and clearly support our friends who are engaged in fostering democracy and free markets in foreign countries.
- Give depth to our relationships with other countries through diplomacy, foreign aid, and exchange programs, which in turn provides us early warning about developing situations.
- Use our university system to continue educating foreign students.
- Increase intelligence gathering with regard to China, Russia, and India.
- Continue to help Russia democratize, using US benefits as leverage to prevent a Russian alliance with Beijing.

Such measures will promote US interests, increase our awareness of developments in Asia, and help to ease tensions in what has suddenly become a more uncertain world. Even though our immediate focus may be on countering terrorism, other long-term aspects of international relations are also vital to US interests, and we must tend to them as well.

NOTES

The sources used in preparing this article were unclassified white papers, articles, and books available to the public. Some Russian, Chinese, and Indian periodicals used were translations available via the internet. Some of the articles on future views of warfare by Chinese military analysts and high-ranking Chinese military personnel were those translated by Michael Pillsbury and published by the National Defense University.

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Reviewed 20 November 2001. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil