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The Moscow–Beijing–Delhi ‘Strategic Triangle’: An Idea Whose Time May Never Come

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The unparalleled position of the United States in the international political system has given rise to an attempt in recent times by Russia, China, and India to forge trilateral cooperation into what has been termed as a ‘strategic triangle’. This article argues that the possibility of the emergence of such a ‘strategic triangle’ remains quite low given the present structure of international politics, where the USA has more comprehensive ties with Russia, China, and India than any two of them have between themselves. Moreover, though bilateral ties among the three states in question have improved in recent years, much more effort is required to bring them to the footing of a meaningful strategic relationship. Not only are Russia, China, and India too weak to balance US power in any significant measure, but the allure of US power remains too strong for them to resist.

Keywords strategic triangle · unipolarity · balance of power · Russia · China · India · USA

THE PRESENT INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM is defined by the phenomenal power that the United States enjoys relative to any other state in the system. This is so unprecedented in global politics that even Paul Kennedy, once a leading proponent of the theory of US decline, had to concede after the American war against the Taliban in Afghanistan that never before in history had such a disparity of power existed as that between the USA and the rest of the major powers today (Kennedy, 2002). This situation evokes different kinds of reactions from other major states in the system. While some states, like France and Germany, seem to be using international institutions and diplomatic maneuvering to make it more difficult for the USA to use its overwhelming power (Pape, 2003), others, like Russia and China, are trying to forge closer ties with countries that share their worldview in the name of a ‘multipolar’ world order. With the USA as the world’s

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only superpower, the idea has taken hold in some capitals that large countries – such as Russia, China, and India – should work concertedly to counterbalance US influence. One of the major endeavors on this front has been an attempt in recent times by Russia, China, and India to forge trilateral cooperation into what has been termed a ‘strategic triangle.’

The visits by Russian President Vladimir Putin to China and India in late 2002 and by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to China and Russia in June 2003 and November 2003, respectively, provided a major boost to talk of a Moscow–Beijing–Delhi ‘strategic triangle’ in popular media and political circles in the three countries.¹ The originator of this idea, Yevgeny Primakov, considers these visits as advancing the idea of a strategic triangle between Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi (*The Hindu*, 2002). Though this idea was not greeted particularly enthusiastically by the governments of China and India when it was first presented by Russia in 1998, it has refused to disappear from international political discourse. The latest diplomatic activity by Russia, China, and India assumes a distinct significance at a time when the preponderance of the might of the USA and its unilateral tendencies seem to be making many countries in the international system uncomfortable. Even a recent report by the US National Intelligence Council entitled ‘Global Trends: 2015’ raises the possibility of China, India, and Russia forming a ‘de facto geo-strategic alliance’ to counter-balance US influence in the near future.²

However, while the unparalleled position of the United States in the international political system may provide huge incentives to Russia, China, and India to try to counteract this global imbalance, there are equally strong incentives for all three to upgrade their bilateral relations with the USA. And, indeed, after 11 September 2001, US relations with all three countries have achieved a highly positive dynamic of their own. Moreover, bilateral relations among the three countries in question remain quite problematic and uncertain, making any talk of a ‘strategic triangle’ quite premature and unrealistic.

This article argues that the possibility of the emergence of such a ‘strategic triangle’ remains quite low given the present structure of international politics, where the USA has more comprehensive ties with Russia, China, and India than any two of them have between themselves. Moreover, though bilateral ties among the three states in question have improved in recent years, much more effort is required to bring them to the footing of a mean-

¹ Andrei Nikolayev, chairman of the Russian Parliament’s Defense Committee, said that Russia was trying to counterbalance NATO expansion by creating in Asia a triangle of strategic stability (*Jane’s Foreign Report*, 2002b). Alexander Yakovenko, official spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, has used a less loaded term, saying that Russia and China were keen on forging trilateral cooperation with India (Radyuhin, 2003a).

² This report is available at http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2015.html.

ingful strategic relationship. Not only are Russia, China, and India too weak to balance US power in any significant measure, the allure of US power remains too strong for them to resist.

First, motivations for a triangular strategic partnership among Russia, China, and India are examined. Thereafter, some recent trends in the bilateral relationships between Russia and China, Russia and India, and China and India are analyzed to highlight the significant attempts made by these nations to improve their bilateral ties. Finally, various constraints in achieving the goal of a ‘strategic triangle’ are discussed, with a special focus on the role of the USA in the foreign policy calculus of each country.

Background and Rationale

The proposal for a Moscow–Beijing–Delhi ‘strategic triangle’ originally came from former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov during his visit to India in 1998, when he argued that such an arrangement would represent a force for greater regional and international stability. This, however, did not elicit as enthusiastic a response from China and India as Russia had perhaps hoped for. Since then, though the three countries have focused on improving the nature of their bilateral relationships, they have maintained a safe distance from the Primakov proposal.

But, this idea of a ‘strategic triangle’ took a tangible form when the foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India – Igor Ivanov, Tang Jiaxuan, and Yashwant Sinha – met on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2002. Despite the fact that nothing concrete emerged out of that meeting, it represented the first major attempt by the three nations to deliberate on world affairs, and has now become a regular feature of interactions among the three states. Vladimir Putin’s visit to China and India later in 2002 and Vajpayee’s visits to Russia and China in 2003 were seen as attempts to impart a new dynamic to this process.

Russia has an extremely important role in this process. Russia’s loss of power and influence on the world scene has been a major cause of concern for virtually all of Russia’s leaders. There has been a growing and pervasive feeling in Russia that it has surrendered its once powerful position on the world stage for a position of little international influence and respect. It is in this respect that Russia has been trying to establish itself as the hub of two bilateral security partnerships that can be used to counteract US power and influence in areas of mutual concern.

While Russia has witnessed a downward slide in its status as a superpower in the last decade, China is a rising power that sees the USA as the greatest obstacle it faces if it is to achieve a pre-eminent position in the global political hierarchy. As a consequence, China recognizes the importance of co-

operating with Russia to check US expansionism in the world, even if only in the short term. In fact, Kenneth Waltz has gone as far as to argue that 'wrong' US policies towards Russia and China are moving these two states closer to each other and might even lead to the formation of a new balance of power against the USA (Waltz, 2000).

India, on the other hand, has different considerations, as it is still far from becoming a global power of any reckoning. However, India has always tried to voice the concerns of the so-called Third World, strongly arguing for respecting the sovereignty of all countries and opposing the use of force in international politics. Growing concern that the USA is becoming too powerful and unilateral, and that a unipolar US-dominated world is not in the best interests of weaker states like India might make the idea of a 'strategic triangle' attractive for India.

Moreover, all of the three countries also realize that there is enormous potential in the economic, political, military, and cultural realms if bilateral relationships among them can be adequately strengthened. And all of them have made some sincere attempts in this regard in the last couple of years. Nevertheless, huge obstacles remain in moving towards a trilateral strategic partnership, making the very idea of a 'strategic triangle' in the context of Russia–China–India interstate relations rather unrealistic.

Russian–China Relations: On a Positive Track

A new era in Sino-Russian relations was ushered in with the breaking up of the Soviet Union and the advent of the post-Cold War period. Moreover, as the relations of China and Russia with the USA deteriorated in the late 1990s, the two countries came closer in identifying with each other's foreign policy interests, calling repeatedly for a multipolar and anti-hegemonic world order (Reuters, 1998; *Washington Post*, 1998). Though neither Russia nor China have been ready to openly provoke the USA, it is clear that their target has been its growing power.

China was worried about what it saw as attempts by the USA to interfere in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states. China had to take a strong stand on this issue, as it had grave implications for China's position on Taiwan. Russia, on the other hand, viewed the expansion of NATO right up to its borders with suspicion about the USA's real motives. In a classic diplomatic quid pro quo, while China sympathized with earlier Russian objections to NATO's eastward expansion and recognized Chechnya as a domestic issue for Russia, Russia recognized Taiwan and Tibet as integral parts of China.³

³ See the text of the China–Russia joint declaration signed in April 1996, FBIS-CHI-96-081, 25 April 1996.

While there is little doubt that the Sino-Russian rapprochement in the post-Cold War period, especially under Boris Yeltsin, has been a result of the changing balance of power in world politics, it is Putin who has tried to diversify the Eurocentric orientation of post-Cold War Russian foreign policy. He has focused on establishing and maintaining a web of relations with major Asian powers, thereby trying to temper the assertive dynamic of US dominance, albeit indirectly. However, while Putin has been trying to build a closer relationship with China, he has also been careful enough in crafting the Sino-Russian relationship as a non-alliance, a non-confrontational relationship that targets no third party.

Russian ties with China in the areas of defense and military technology remain central to the overall Sino-Russian relationship. These range from the short-term purchase of Russian weapons by China to long-term cooperation on joint research, development, and production of military equipment, including relatively new technologies for intercontinental ballistic missile and submarine-launched ballistic missile production (Nemets & Scherer, 2000). China is the Russian defense industry's largest client, with sales estimated to be between \$1 and \$2 billion of a total \$4 billion of Russian military exports (Kuchins, 2002: 212).

Strengthening the bilateral economic relationship has clearly been the focus area for Russia, impressed as it has been during the last couple of years with China's high growth rates. Emphasis, therefore, has been on increasing bilateral trade in goods and services and cooperation in the energy sector. The official trade turnover between the two nations hit \$12 billion in 2002, with increasing Chinese demand for Russian industrial and engineering products, civilian nuclear expertise, and oil. China has also supported Russia's attempts at joining the World Trade Organization, as prioritizing trade and economic cooperation remains key for any long-term strategic partnership.

The importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that has evolved into a forum for discussion on regional security and economic issues cannot be overstated for Sino-Russian relations (*Jane's Defense Weekly*, 2002). This has become even more important since 11 September 2001, as the growth of ethnic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism is a major cause of concern for both countries. Russia and China have been successful in using the USA's strong aversion to terrorism since 9/11 for their own ends – to tackle Islamic insurgency within their territories. In the post-9/11 environment, the SCO also serves as a means of keeping control of Central Asia and limiting US influence in the region. In fact, the SCO has denounced the misuse of the 'war on terror' to target any country the USA sees fit, and it threw its weight behind the UN in an attempt to express its disapproval of the US-led war in Iraq (Radyuhin, 2003b).

While bilateral concerns remain dominant in Sino-Russian relations, the two countries have also tried to respond to global security concerns by

chalking out common strategies. The latest global concerns have been Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and the weakening of the global non-proliferation and arms control regimes. Russia and China are both important players in ensuring the success of any strategies to deal with such concerns. Both have emphasized the centrality of the UN in dealing with these issues, thereby making their displeasure with the USA's unilateral methods explicit (*New York Times*, 2002b). They have also, time and again, called for building a multipolar, fair, and democratic world order based on the universally recognized principles of international law. However, how far they themselves can offer any workable alternative strategies and restrain the USA remains unclear. But, what is undoubtedly clear is that Sino-Russian ties today are more positive and constructive than at any time since the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s.

Russia–India Relations: Historically Robust

There are few examples of a relationship between countries that has been as stable as the one between India and Russia. Despite the momentous changes in the international environment following the end of the Cold War, there remains a continued convergence of interests that makes it advantageous for both India and Russia to maintain close ties. Barring a fleeting hiccup during Boris Yeltsin's term as Russia's president, New Delhi and Moscow have been extraordinarily successful in nurturing a friction-free relationship that harks back to the Soviet era.

Russia's current president, Vladimir Putin, and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee had their fourth summit meeting in little more than two years when Vajpayee visited Russia in June 2003. This was in sharp contrast to the erratic ties India had with Russia while Yeltsin was at the helm. While maintaining a continuity in ensuring a substantive and incremental pattern of relations with the USA and Western Europe, Putin has revived equations with other major Asian nations like China, Japan, and India.

In their own ways, both India and Russia are struggling to define their relations with other major players on the global stage in the post-9/11 global context, where the rules of international politics are in a state of flux and where the terms of economic interaction between nations are being reset. Therefore, their continued affirmation of a longstanding friendship assumes more than just a symbolic importance.

During Putin's visit to India in December 2002, even as Russia secured India's agreement to intensify the strategic partnership, India was able to receive Russian support for its position on Pakistan, with Russia calling upon Pakistan to end its support for cross-border terrorism (*New York Times*,

2002c). Russia’s endorsement of the Indian position on terrorism and Pakistan reflected Russian desires to maintain the traditional goodwill in mutual relations by genuflecting politically to India’s deepest security concerns. This is in sharp contrast to the USA, which has effectively glossed over India’s major security concerns with respect to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India.

Perhaps the most important element of Indo-Russian bilateral relations is the defense ties between the two countries. Not only is Russia the biggest supplier of defense products to India, but the India–Russia defense relationship also encompasses a wide range of activity, including joint research, design, development, and coproduction (Shukla, 1999). Indian and Russian defense companies are not only designing and developing but will also be jointly marketing the anti-ship missile, *Brahmos*, in other countries. Russia has also made a proposal to India to jointly develop a next generation Advanced Jet Trainer with an eye on the global market. Russia has agreed to further expand defense-supplies ties with India, both in content and range, and has also agreed to give the nod to cooperation in sophisticated spheres of technology, about which the USA and other Western nations have seemed reticent. This includes technology related to the peaceful uses of space and atomic energy, as well as the supply of the fifth generation of advance fighter aircraft and a whole range of military equipment (*New York Times*, 2002a). The Russian and Indian navies have also started holding joint war games in the Indian Ocean annually as part of joint efforts to strengthen security in the region.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of Indo-Russian relations today is the upgrading of bilateral economic and trade relations, which fails to reflect the potential that exists. In fact, trade between the countries has declined over the last three years.⁴ In order to address this problem, Russia has not only been trying to woo Indian investors but has also agreed to use the amount that India owes it as debt from the past to fund joint ventures in the fields of telecommunications, aluminum, and information technology (Dixit, 2002).

However, on various regional and global issues, India and Russia find themselves on the same side. Both have made their position clear with respect to what they see as the unilateral tendencies of US foreign policy, and they would like to see the UN as the proper forum for dealing with issues of international peace and security (Cherian, 2000). Their geopolitical and security interests in the Central Asian region are also compatible, in so far as religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, smuggling in small arms, and organized crime, emanating largely from Central Asia, threaten both India and Russia equally. The Indo-Russian cooperation seems to be steadily progressing on the basis of the two countries’ shared long-term national and

⁴ See statistics on Indo-Russian trade, available at <http://meadev.nic.in/foreign/newrussia.htm>.

geopolitical interests and their common stand on key global and regional problems.

China–India Relations: Mending Fences

Bilateral relations between India and the People's Republic of China have indeed come a long way since their nadir in the immediate aftermath of India's nuclear tests in May 1998. Immediately prior to the nuclear tests, China had been singled out by India's defense minister as the 'number one' security threat for India (*New York Times*, 1998). Following the tests, the Indian prime minister wrote to the US president justifying Indian nuclear tests as a response to the threat posed by China.⁵ Not surprisingly, China reacted strongly and diplomatic relations between the two countries plummeted to an all-time low.⁶

However, some five years later, relations between the two countries seem to be on the upswing. The visit of the Indian minister for external affairs to China in 1999 marked the resumption of high-level dialogue, and the two sides declared that they were not threats to each other. A bilateral security dialogue was also initiated that has helped the two countries to openly express and share their security concerns with each other. India and China also decided to expedite the process of demarcation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the Joint Working Group (JWG) on the boundary question, set up in 1988, has been meeting regularly. As a first step in this direction, the two countries exchanged border maps on the least controversial middle sector of the LAC. The two states are now committed to transforming the 4,056-km LAC into a mutually acceptable and internationally recognized boundary.

The Indian prime minister made a visit to China in June 2003, the first by an Indian premier in a decade. The joint declaration signed during this visit expressed the view that China was not a threat to India. The two states appointed special representatives in order to impart momentum to the border negotiations that have been going on for 22 years, with the prime minister's principal secretary becoming India's political-level negotiator, replacing the India–China JWG. India acknowledged China's sovereignty over Tibet and pledged not to allow 'anti-China' political activities in India. For its part, China has acknowledged India's 1975 annexation of the former monarchy of Sikkim by agreeing to open a trading post along the border with the former kingdom.⁷

⁵ The text of the letter was published in the *New York Times*, 13 May 1998.

⁶ For a sample of the strong reaction of the Chinese government, see *Beijing Review* (1998); see also FBIS, DRC, 28 July 1998.

⁷ See the text of the joint India–China declaration, available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/jdhome.htm>.

It is at the international level, however, that India and China have found some real convergence of interests. Indian and China have both expressed concern about the USA's use of military power around the world (Associated Foreign Press, 1999), and both were publicly opposed to the war in Iraq. Both also favor more democratic international economic regimes. They have strongly resisted efforts by the USA and other developed nations to link global trade to labor and environmental standards, realizing clearly that this would put them at a huge disadvantage vis-à-vis the developed world, thereby hampering their drive towards economic development, the number one priority for both countries.

In recent years, India and China have attempted to build their bilateral relationship on the basis of their larger world-view of international politics. As they have found a distinct convergence of their interests on the world stage, they have used it to strengthen their bilateral relations. India and China have strengthened this bilateral relationship in areas as distinct as cultural and educational exchanges, military exchanges, and science and technology cooperation. Military cooperation, something unthinkable a few years back, has become significant, with Indian and Chinese navies conducting a joint naval exercise off the Shanghai coast last year and further proposals to hold a joint army exercise soon. Bilateral trade has seen rapid growth, from a trade volume of \$265 million in 1991 to \$3,596 million in 2001. In 2001, bilateral trade saw an increase of 23.4% over 2000.⁸ Proposals for the signing of a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement and a free-trade agreement between the two states have also gathered momentum.

However, although India and China share similar concerns about the growing global dominance of the USA, the threat of religious and ethnic movements in the form of terrorism, and the need to accord primacy to economic development, there are a number of obstacles that prevent the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship from achieving its full potential.

Constraints: How Strong?

From the above discussion of the bilateral relationships between Russia and China, Russia and India, and China and India, it can be argued that windows of opportunity have certainly opened up for new alignments in global politics. The three major second-tier powers in the international system share a desire for more strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the only remaining superpower, the USA. The three states also hold very similar views on a range of international issues, including terrorism, Iraq, the Middle East, the role of the UN, non-proliferation, and regional security.

⁸ See statistics on India–China trade, available at <http://meadev.nic.in/foreign/indo-china.htm>.

However, there are equally strong – if not stronger – constraints that prevent this remarkable convergence of interests from evolving into a tri-lateral strategic partnership, what has been referred to as a ‘strategic triangle.’

Bilateral Impediments

The most difficult aspect of this strategic partnership is the highly uncertain nature of the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. China has tried hard to maintain a rough balance of power in South Asia by preventing India from gaining an upper hand over Pakistan. It has consistently assisted Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs to counterbalance India’s development of new weapons systems. India’s preoccupation with Pakistan reduces India to the level of a regional power, while China can claim the status of an Asian and world power. It is instructive to note that even as India and China share similar concerns regarding Islamic terrorism in Kashmir and Xinjiang, respectively, China has been rather unwilling to make common cause with India against Pakistan.

China’s rapid economic growth in the last decade has given it the capability to transform itself into a military power. Its rapidly modernizing military is a cause of great concern for India. China’s military may or may not be able to take on the USA in the next few years, but it will surely become the most dominant force in Asia (Khalilzad et al., 1999). As China becomes more reliant on imported oil for its rapidly growing industrial economy, it will develop and exercise military power-projection capabilities to protect the shipping that transports oil from the Persian Gulf to China. The capability to project power would require access to advanced naval bases along the sea-lines of communication and forces capable of gaining and sustaining naval and air superiority.

China’s assistance to Burma in constructing and improving port facilities on two islands in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is a first step towards securing military-base privileges in the Indian Ocean (Garver, 2001: 385–386). These port facilities can be used as a listening post to gather intelligence on Indian naval operations and as a forward base for future Chinese naval operations in the Indian Ocean, thereby threatening India’s traditional geographic advantages in the Indian Ocean.

For its part, India seems to have lost the battle over Tibet to China, despite the fact that Tibet constitutes China’s only truly fundamental vulnerability vis-à-vis India (Garver, 2001: 32–78). India has failed to limit China’s military use of Tibet, despite the great implications of this for Indian security, even as Tibet has become a platform for the projection of Chinese military power. The proposed opening up of the Nathula trade route that connects Tibet and Sikkim is also fraught with danger, as there are concerns that threats to the

internal security of India posed by China could get worse with this development.

There were also reports that even as the Indian prime minister was visiting China last year, Chinese troops had intruded into the eastern sector of the Line of Actual Control in another of the northeastern Indian states, Arunachal Pradesh (Joseph, 2003). China lays claim to 90,000 km² of land in Arunachal Pradesh and does not recognize Arunachal Pradesh as part of Indian territory.

No results of any substance have been forthcoming from the Sino-Indian border negotiations, even as the talks continue endlessly, and the momentum of the talks seems to have flagged. So far, only the maps of the middle sector of the LAC, the least controversial part of the boundary, have been exchanged and even the finalization of this middle section awaits confirmation.

Despite the rhetoric of a new phase in the relationship, the problems between India and China are substantial and complicated, with no easy resolution in sight. Also, the lack of substantial bilateral trade means there is no real economic dimension to boost the relationship. For its part, China sees a close Indo-US relationship as an attempt by the USA to encircle it, especially as it comes alongside increasing US military presence and influence throughout Central and South Asia following 9/11. While both China and India have global aspirations, they also have some significant conflicting interests, thereby making a significant convergence in their foreign policies difficult, at least in the near future.

The other pillar of the strategic triangle, the Russia–India bilateral relationship, also seems less promising on closer examination. This seems to be a classic case of more style and little substance (Chaudhary, 2002). In bilateral terms, it is the nature and content of Indo-Russian economic and trade relations that would ultimately constitute the foundation and give substance to any strategic partnership. However, although the two countries have an extraordinary defense relationship, the Indo-Russian trade relationship hardly inspires any confidence, as their bilateral trade shows persistent decline for the last three years.

As Putin has focused on his number one priority, the strengthening of the Russian economy, he seems to have gravitated to the West, with India having little to offer Russia in this regard. If anything, the momentum of Indo-Russian economic cooperation seems to be slackening on such crucial issues as civilian nuclear energy and other aspects of energy security, as various opportunities in energy-security cooperation remain unexploited (Sudarshan, 2002). And even the bilateral defense relationship is bound to come under pressure: India is adjusting to the changing nature of modern warfare and shifting its defense priorities to the purchase of smart, modern weaponry, which Russia is ill-equipped to provide.

Russia is also the largest supplier of defense equipment to China, with the result that the modernization of the Chinese military owes a lot to Russian supplies. This is not only of direct strategic consequence for Indian security, but also creates a cascading effect, whereby Russian military technology and knowhow gets transferred to Pakistan via China. Therefore, the prospects of Indo-Russian defense and political cooperation will be assessed by India in the light of Russia's defense supplies and cooperation arrangements with China.

The China–Russia bilateral relationship is also not as free from friction as it appears on the surface. Despite the dramatic expansion of Sino-Russian relations in recent years, Russia and China are – sooner rather than later – bound to run into the limits that geography imposes on two large and ambitious neighbors. Russia has reasons to worry about China's rising profile in East and Northeast Asia, about Chinese immigrants overrunning the Russian Far East,⁹ and about China's economy dwarfing its own. Indeed, it has been argued that it will take enormous efforts on the part of Russia and China for them to avoid geopolitical confrontation (Kuchins, 2002; Anderson, 1997). People-to-people contacts between the two societies remain lukewarm at best, and bilateral economic relations, despite the best efforts of both governments, have been slow to pick up.

Given the divergence between their geopolitical and strategic interests, it is anybody's guess how far Russia and China might be able to maintain the current positive trend in their relationship. Perhaps the greatest danger to this relationship comes from a weakened Russia unable to control instability along the lengthy Sino-Russian border and in Central Asia. Despite the renunciation of territorial claims under the Sino-Russian treaty, it is very possible that if China continues to grow while Russia stagnates, China might opt for a revision of the Sino-Russian border. And, even though China is the largest buyer of Russian conventional weaponry, many in Russia see this as counterproductive, because China may emerge as the greatest potential security threat to Russia, worse than what the USA could ever become. China, meanwhile, is working towards diversifying its military imports from sources other than Russia, the European Union being a major alternative supplier.

The Centrality of the USA

Problems in the bilateral relationships between China and India, Russia and India, and Russia and China have been made even more complicated by the special relationships that the USA has been able to cultivate with each of

⁹ According to the official statistics, the Chinese population in Russia grew by nearly a factor of 20 in the 1990s, from a very low base of about 11,000 to over 200,000 (Trenin, 2002: 216–217).

these three nations. This has been especially true after 11 September 2001, as the USA’s relationships with all three – and especially with Russia and India – have touched new highs. Though Russia, China, and India are obviously pursuing their own interests in their engagement with the USA, this imposes severe constraints on their attempts at coming together and forging a ‘strategic triangle’, since all three attach the highest importance to their ties with the USA.

As Russia has realized the importance of reviving its ailing economy, it has cast its lot overwhelmingly with the West, and in particular the USA. There is a realization in Russia that Russia security can only be ensured through membership in a powerful and ever-growing Western union. All other considerations have been subordinated to this attempt to get closer to the USA (Menges, 2001). So, even as Russia has quietly acquiesced to the US decision to renounce the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the expansion of NATO right up to Russian borders, it has used multilateral channels like the UN Security Council to put up a token resistance to the USA’s global preponderance. Even on Iraq, Russia chose to let France take the heat in the UN debates, while it played safe by not overtly antagonizing the USA.

The events of 11 September 2001 gave Russia a significant opportunity to prove its utility to the USA on the issue of global terrorism. Putin has not only used the subsequent global ‘war on terrorism’ to bolster his own position vis-à-vis domestic issues like Chechnya, but has also sought to position himself as the head of an anti-terrorism alliance straddling Europe and Asia. Russia made a major contribution to the war in Afghanistan by sharing intelligence, stepping up efforts to bolster the Northern Alliance, and even accepting the US military presence in the region. It is another matter, though, that Russia can do little about the expansion of the USA’s political and military presence in the Gulf and South and Central Asia under the garb of the ‘war on terrorism’. Russia’s decision to go along with the NATO enlargement also had to do with a realization that such a development was inevitable, whether Russia liked it or not. Russia, therefore, decided to use NATO enlargement to its best advantage by negotiating some concessions for itself, especially a new ‘partnership’ with NATO, though without a veto right over NATO decisions. This pragmatism may also be due to the fact that Russia’s security today is not threatened as much by the USA as it is by transnational terrorism, ethnic and religious extremism, illegal migration, proliferation of illegal arms, and drug trafficking.

Russia today faces the enormous challenge of resolving the contradictions between its desire to emerge once again as a pre-eminent power on the international stage and the realistic compulsions of reconciling itself to the expanding political, strategic, and technological influence of the USA. As of now, it seems to have concluded that cooperating with the USA can perhaps

give Russia both a voice on major global developments and US assistance in shoring up its economy. Despite Russia's strong opposition to the US-led war in Iraq, it has gravitated closer to US positions on major international issues. It has abandoned talk of expanding its nuclear assistance to Iran and pushed that country to subject its nuclear program to strict international inspections. Russia has teamed up with China to bring new pressure on North Korea to negotiate on its nuclear weapons program. It has also stayed away from the forefront of opposition to the USA's postwar policies for Iraq at the UN. This had led some to speculate that the emerging US–Russian global partnership could attain even greater significance than the relationships that the US currently enjoys with its traditional European allies (Stent & Shevtsova, 2003).

Russia's increasing gravitation towards the USA must be difficult for China to come to terms with, even though China has also moved considerably closer to the USA, especially through its strong support of the anti-terror coalition in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. China has not only supported the US invasion of Afghanistan to dislodge the Taliban and the installation of the Hamid Karzai government, but has also been collaborating with the USA in the sphere of counterterrorism. In some ways, international developments post-9/11 have helped by shifting the focus of US national security policy away from containing China as its future rival towards the elimination of transnational terrorist networks. There seems to be a growing awareness that China may have been the biggest beneficiary of the post-9/11 global climate as it moved it off the USA's official list of enemies (Zakaria, 2002).

This does not mean, however, that China would not be concerned by Russia's deal-making with the USA on issues ranging from missile defense to Iraq, leaving China as the only major opponent of US policies. China was trying to build a close relationship with Russia by emphasizing their common opposition to various US policies, such as the USA's pursuit of ballistic missile defense and its disregard for multilateral agreements.

The joint opposition of Russia and China to US preponderance on international issues seems to be collapsing in the post-9/11 environment, with Russia aggressively wooing the USA, thereby virtually isolating China. While China also feels challenged by the growing Western presence in Central Asia, with the USA establishing unprecedented military bases in the region, Russia's national security seems to have been strengthened – and Russia seems to be gaining control over key sectors in the region, including oil, minerals, and the defense industry. China, fearing its marginalization in the emerging international security environment, has also been trying to project an image of itself as a responsible global player. Its active role in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table has been much appreciated by the United States.

India, being the weakest of the three nations, has to operate its foreign policy within different parameters. Its relations with the USA, Russia, and China are far thinner than the ties among the other three. However, the exclusive superpower status of the USA imparts a special quality to India's ties with it. During the Cold War, India's relations with the USA and the former Soviet Union (now Russia) were viewed in a zero-sum context. The extent to which the international environment has changed can be gauged from the fact that now Russia itself has emerged as a close ally of the USA.

In recent years, India has made a serious attempt to upgrade its bilateral relationship with the United States. It has engaged the USA on a host of issues – from non-proliferation and arms control (Pant, 2002), trade, and cultural exchanges to military-technical cooperation (Blackwill, 2002). There is no denying that India would like to consolidate this upward movement in bilateral relations. There are strong domestic constituencies in both India and the USA that believe that close and cooperative relations between the two nations will endure in the long run because of the convergence of their democratic values and vital national interests. This is despite a feeling in some quarters in India that the USA has not supported it strongly enough vis-à-vis Pakistan's abetment of terrorism on Indian territory. A substantial part of Indo-US relations remains hyphenated to Pakistan, despite protestations to the contrary, especially since Pakistan's newfound geographical relevance in the US-led coalition's operations against Afghanistan.

Despite this, however, Indian foreign policy today is strongly geared towards influencing the US administration in its favor, with some even suggesting an alignment with the USA to contain China's growing influence in Asia (*Jane's Foreign Report*, 2002a). While a significant section of the Indian political establishment might not be enthusiastic about openly joining hands with the USA to contain China, there is less aversion to closer Indo-US ties than ever before. It can also be argued that, in the long run, India and the USA are bound to come closer as Pakistan's utility in the 'war on terrorism' declines and containing fundamentalism in Pakistan itself becomes a foreign policy priority for the USA (*Jane's Foreign Report*, 2003). The USA also hopes that India will join its Proliferation Security Initiative and missile defense program, further cementing bilateral ties. In fact, the two countries have signed the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' agreement that paves the way for Indo-US cooperation in areas that include civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs and high-technology trade, as well as dialogue on missile defense.

The centrality of the United States in the foreign policies of Russia, China, and India makes it all but impossible for the three countries to come together and forge a united front against the USA in the near term. Even a mundane attempt by Russia, China, and India to come closer to each other will be effectively thwarted by the USA, as the latter is in the privileged position of

wooing Russia and India in order to contain the rise of China in the long run. Russia and India will be only too willing to play this game.

Conclusion

The present structure of the international system gives the USA enormous advantages in its dealings with the rest of the world through the unprecedented power that it enjoys. This gives the USA a certain indispensable quality in so far as other states are concerned, as it has much to offer – whether in terms of military protection, economic development, or even the force of its ideas – and can do so on its own terms. So, while Russia, China, and India have tried to engage the USA in various forms, they have found it difficult to overcome their distrust of each other. And, as one of the three becomes more powerful, the other two may be more willing to counterbalance it – maybe even in coordination with the USA – than to join its bandwagon to create a global equipoise to US power.¹⁰ Not only are the political and economic costs of countering US power too high, but the very idea of counterbalancing the USA is unrealistic for Russia, China, and India, given the current distribution of power in the global system. On the other hand, it is worth their efforts to try to prevent the emergence of each other as a global power, possibly even with the help of the USA.

As a consequence, given the centrality of the United States to the present global political and economic order, Russia will never want to join the Chinese political and economic sphere, as the USA has much more to offer it politically and economically. The same goes for China, which has gained enormously owing to its economic ties with the USA, while a declining Russia and still-economically weak India do not show much promise. India, afraid of China and not overly optimistic about Russia's prospects, has all reason not to make its US policy contingent on the sensitivities of other states. The result is that each of the three countries has been at pains to explain to the USA that their attempts to come closer to each other are in no way directed at the United States, lest the USA take exception.

William Wohlforth has argued that even while they talk of counterbalancing US power, in practice many countries actually bandwagon with the United States (Wohlforth, 1999). In the case of Russia, China, and India, however, the talk has never been about creating a counterpoise to the USA. This is because the three states recognize the heavily skewed distribution of

¹⁰ William Wohlforth (1999: 28) makes a similar point when he argues that efforts to counterbalance the USA globally would generate powerful countervailing actions locally. As a result, the second-tier states might end up balancing against each other rather than against the USA.

power in the present international system and the importance of the USA in their foreign policy calculus.

The international system today is dominated by the USA to such an extent that even three major players in global politics like Russia, China, and India together cannot make any appreciable difference to the system. Also, these three states have a long distance to travel before they can overcome their mutual distrust, if they at all aspire to posing a cohesive challenge to the USA. This makes it rather safe to conclude that, despite all the rhetoric of a Moscow–Beijing–Delhi ‘strategic triangle’, there is little possibility of the idea coming to fruition any time soon.

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