The USA, USSR, and PRC

The Great Powers Triangle

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There are two major triangular relationships in contemporary world politics: Washington-Moscow-Peking, and USA-European Economic Community (EEC)-Japan. The first, the two superpowers and the emerging superpower of China (PRC), is characterized by a lack of mutual trust, ideological affinity, or common interests in global security or economic matters. The USA-EEC-Japan relationship, on the other hand, is based on common trust, common security and economic interests, common ideological factors, and on cultural affinities between the U.S. and the EEC.

It is the great powers triangle of Washington-Moscow-Peking that has the greater importance and significance for global peace and for the avoidance of any nuclear war. Its impact is considerable in such parts of the Third World as the Middle East, East Asia, South and Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, and in many other regions. The great powers triangle is mainly a product of two major factors: the Sino-Soviet rift and the limited Sino-American rapprochement begun in 1971-72 after twenty years of frozen and hostile relations between the world’s most powerful and the world’s most populous countries.

The Sino-Soviet rift is one of the great schisms of contemporary international relations and it carries great strategic and diplomatic implications. It has greatly affected the foreign policies of the two major Communist countries. The Sino-Soviet rift has now about twenty years of history behind it. It became publicly known in 1959, when the Soviet Union took a neutral stand in the growing Sino-Indian conflict, the first occasion on which the Soviet Union had shown “neutrality” in a conflict between a Communist and a non-Communist state. The Soviet role in the 1962 Sino-Indian border war made it worse, and in the spring of 1969 the two countries were on the verge of armed conflict. U.S. policymakers became aware that in place of a worldwide monolithic Communist bloc there were now two Communist giants edging toward a near war situation. Washington did not take advantage of the great schism for a number of reasons, the major one being the Vietnam war, in which Moscow and Peking, in spite of their rift, had the common objective of helping North Vietnam against the U.S.

The serious armed conflict between the Soviet Union and the Peoples’ Republic of China in March, 1969, set in motion a chain of developments in international relations. Soon after Richard Nixon entered the White House he decided to explore possibilities of diplomatic opening to China within the context of the Nixon Doctrine for Asia formulated in August, 1969. Nixon perceived correctly China’s genuine fear of the Soviet Union, and Peking seemed to conclude that it was far better to have a good relationship with one superpower when the other was thinking in terms of a preemptive war against China. Nixon got favorable responses from Peking, not because of any major ideological changes in Chairman Mao’s policy or thought, but because of China’s growing fears of Moscow. In the wake of President Nixon’s visit to China in February, 1972, and with the signing of the 1972 Shanghai communique, the “great powers triangle” was born. John P. Davis, a China expert, characterized the triangular relationship as one in which each power “is the adversary of each of the other two. But each is also a potential ally of each of the remaining two against the other.”

The new Sino-American relationship led to what President Nixon called “speculation of a U.S.-Chinese alignment,” which Nixon himself termed “fanciful.” There was no immediate détente between Washington and Peking, nor did anybody expect such a détente. The two decades of frozen relations between the U.S. and the PRC ended, and a new era of relaxation of tensions and conflicts between the two countries began. Though the new great powers relationship is described as “triangular,” there have not yet been any triangular meetings or discussion, merely

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U.S.-USSR or U.S.-PRC talks. But the absentee third party has been of crucial importance in Washington's negotiations with both the Soviet and Chinese leaders. China never misses an opportunity to tell Americans and the world about the "dangers" from the "Soviet Social Imperialist." The Kremlin leaders, for their part, are never tired of designating "Maoist China" as the potential greatest threat to world peace and stability.

Nixon visited Moscow in May, 1972, and Nixon and Brezhnev signed a document asserting "basic principles of mutual relations between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," which may be described as a counterbalance to the 1972 Shanghai communiqué. All in all the United States seemed to be the major gainer of the great powers triangle, though China benefited from a reduction in its security problems. Nixon-Kissinger gave the world hope for "peace in our generation." The U.S. image in the world, which was adversely affected by the Vietnam war (which also caused great internal dissenion in the United States), was greatly enhanced by the new triangular relationship. U.S. troops could be withdrawn peacefully from Vietnam; Nixon was given the red carpet treatment in Moscow at a time when he ordered a renewal of bombing in North Vietnam and a blockade of its ports; the SALT I agreement could be signed with the Soviet Union much more readily because "China" was a major factor in the Soviet Union's foreign policy. Nixon said bluntly: "We want to improve relations with the PRC as a means of coping with the Soviet Union."

The U.S.-China limited rapprochement reduced tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, where "threats" from Communist China were a source of worry to the United States and its Asian allies. Japan and Southeast Asian countries, like the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, began to have a better diplomatic situation because of the improved Sino-American relationship and because of the growing Sino-Soviet rift. Japan and two Asian members of SEATO, the Philippines and Thailand, established diplomatic links with the PRC; Pakistan, the other Asian member of SEATO, already had very close and friendly relations with Peking. Australia and New Zealand, the U.S. partners in ANZUS, had also established full diplomatic relations with the PRC. The 1975 Communist victory in Indochina did not cause any alarm among non-Communist Asian countries; the "domino theory" was disproven.

How did this affect U.S.-USSR relations? The Soviet Union had to show flexibility toward Washington in the pursuit of its major foreign policy objective: to prevent any closer ties between the U.S. and the PRC. In 1972-74 the world was no doubt safer from a third world war than it had been earlier in the nuclear age. Thus the Nixon-Kissinger triangular diplomacy with Moscow and Peking served both U.S. global interests as well as world peace and security. Truc, there were regional wars and tensions, as in South Asia (1971), the Middle East (1973), and in Africa (1975). But the chances of global crises such as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the earlier Berlin crises, which threatened direct confrontation between two superpowers, were considerably less. Similarly, basic U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region were not threatened: only Taiwan and South Korea continued to feel insecure.

In many parts of the Third World, such as Southern Africa and the Middle East, the two superpowers continued by diplomacy their pursuit of influence and power. Similarly, Moscow and Peking intensified their diplomatic efforts to acquire greater influence and power in the Third World, particularly in East, South, and Southeast Asia. While the United States played a stabilizing role in areas of tension in the Third World, the Soviet Union continued its expansionist designs. China, on the contrary, wants the U.S. presence and a more active U.S. role in regional areas of tension, not out of love of the United States, but out of the desire to pursue a policy of containment of Soviet influence and power in the Third World. The Chinese leaders have expressed these views to American policymakers as well as to leaders of Asian countries.

The Kremlin leaders were upset by prospects of closer Sino-American ties, but as they began to perceive that the Sino-American relationship had to overcome a major hurdle on the Taiwan issue, they began to act on their expansionist designs, at some cost to the United States and China. Dimitri K. Simes, a Soviet expert, has judged that the Soviet Union regards détente as an "activist offensive strategy." Simes added that "the USSR did not forego any opportunity to improve its international standing at the expense of Washington and Peking but on the other hand it dared not rock the boat hard" and concluded: "despite détente, the Soviet Union felt free to work against the vital interests of the United States."

The fragile triangular Washington-Moscow-Peking relationship began early to show signs of strain and stress. Domestic and international factors caused a weakening of the Nixon-Kissinger hope of building "a new structure of peace in the world." In the United States the Watergate scandal diminished Nixon's authority and finally led to his resignation. President Ford, with the help of Kissinger, carried on triangular diplomacy. He met Brezhnev at Vladivostok in November, 1974, and agreed on a limited accord on strategic arms limitations; in August, 1975, Ford signed the Helsinki agreement, which gave "de jure" recognition to the Soviet "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe. He also went to China in December, 1975, and, according to the Chinese leader Teng Hsiao-ping, renewed Nixon's promise of establishing full diplomatic relations after his "reelection" in 1976. Nixon had made such a promise during his 1972 visit to China. Ford denied having renewed this commitment, though his denial is not very convincing.

In any case, the Sino-American relationship did not develop as the 1972 Nixon visit led many people to hope. U.S. policymakers were not sure whether China gives greater priority to the Taiwan issue or to détente between the U.S. and USSR. Following the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, and the subsequent internal power struggle, U.S. policymakers seemed to prefer to "wait and see." When I visited China in July, 1976, the
Chinese expressed their frustration over the slow progress made toward the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the United States, but they seemed to have appreciated President Ford’s difficulties in the 1976 election year. And they appeared prepared to accept the U.S. “wait-and-see” policy. However, they made it clear that the concept of “one China,” which was recognized in the 1972 Shanghai communique, “is an article of faith” with the Chinese people. Taiwan “is an integral part of China,” and they do not intend to compromise on this issue.

When I raised questions about the Chinese attitude toward U.S.-USSR détente, they expressed concern about any such agreement between the two superpowers, though they felt convinced that “no genuine understanding is possible between the USA and the USSR.” The Chinese claim that, unlike the Soviet Union, they did not create any problems for the United States either in the Asia/Pacific region or in the Middle East or Africa. In fact, the Chinese seemed to share common though not identical interests with the United States on many issues of contemporary world politics. Their main grievance relates to the lack of a full diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and the PRC, Taiwan remaining the principal hurdle in the emerging Sino-American relationship.

The real threat to the great powers triangle is the huge military build-up by the Soviet Union and that nation’s adventures. Although his views are disputed, Major-General George J. Keegan, Jr., who retired from his position as U.S. Air Force chief of intelligence on January 1, 1978, gives a grim picture of the “Soviet military superiority.” “By every criterion used to measure strategic balance—that is, damage expectancy, throw-weight, equivalent megatonnage or technology—I am unaware of a single important category in which the Soviets have not established a significant lead over the United States.” Similar warnings and assessments have been made by General Alexander Haig and by former Defense secretaries Melvin Laird and James Schlesinger. General Haig has said that “the [Soviet] big build-up is part of the Kremlin strategy of a worldwide imperialism. We are getting to the fine-edge of a disaster.” Dr. Richard Pipes, who headed President Carter’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, believes that “the Soviet Union’s strategic nuclear doctrine seeks victory, not deterrence superiority and offensive, perhaps pre-emptive, operations rather than retaliation.”

The rationale of détente with the Soviet Union, in the age of nuclear weapons, cannot be challenged. President Carter has stated that “negotiations with the Soviet Union will be guided by a vision of a gentler, freer and more bountiful world,” but he also added that “the basis for a complete mutual trust [with the Soviet Union] does not yet exist; if a strategic arms limitation agreement cannot be reached, there should be no doubt that the United States can and will do what it must to protect security and insure the adequacy of our strategic posture.” Brezhnev, on the other hand, told French President Giscard that “there were difficulties in his relations with the Carter administration and indicated that he was not sure how the Soviet-American relationship would develop.” President Carter’s emphasis on “Human Rights” has clearly annoyed the Russians.

Since Carter became president there have been several ups and downs in the Soviet-American relationship. At one stage both sides were optimistic about an early conclusion of SALT II. On August 16, 1977, Brezhnev welcomed President Carter’s “latest efforts to mend Soviet-American relations” and pledged to resolve current differences. But on August 10 Soviet news agency Tass made a sharp attack on President Carter, accusing him of yielding to the Pentagon by approving appropriations for the neutron bomb. On September 9, 1977, in his eighty-minute session with U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger, Brezhnev expressed dissatisfaction with the current American position on strategic arms control. President Carter and his principal foreign policy advisors similarly expressed “satisfaction” as well as “worries” on the current phase of the U.S.-USSR relationship. The progress toward the SALT II agreement has been slow and unsatisfactory, each side accusing the other of “delays” and “abstraction.”

The latest Soviet concerns over lack of progress in SALT II talks were made in a strong five thousand-word statement in Pravda on February 12, 1978. It was the most detailed public comment on technical aspects of SALT II talks, putting the entire blame on the United States. In its reply to the Soviet comments the Carter administration expressed the view that the article has done “harm” to any prospect of an early conclusion of SALT II agreement.

The Carter administration is equally irritated over the Soviet-Cuban military adventures in Southern Africa and in the Horn of Africa. According to the U.S. estimate, Cuba has well over twenty thousand troops stationed in Africa, mainly in Angola and Ethiopia but also spread across the continent in fifteen countries from the island of Madagascar in the east to Guinea in the west. In spite of an active policy of détente since 1972, recent developments in Africa and the Middle East, where the Soviet Union is opposing President Anwar Sadat’s peace efforts, show that the two superpowers have conflicting views and interests in volatile areas of the Third World. The great issue facing the Carter administration is whether policy toward Africa should be subordinated to the United States’ overall relationship with the Soviet Union. According to the press reports, Carter’s “global strategists” feel that the time has come for Washington to stand up to Moscow and counter its repeated thrusts into the troubled continent of Africa.

When I went to China in July, 1976, I found China’s attitude toward “stalemate” in Sino-American relations one of “anguish.” The Chinese appreciated President Ford’s difficulties in an election year, as I’ve noted already, and were prepared to give President Carter time to formulate his China policy. When Secretary of State Vance went to China in August, 1977, with the proposal that the existing U.S. liaison office be shifted to Taiwan and that an American ambassador be posted in Peking, the Chinese were angered.
Vance’s August mission led Vice-Premier Teng Hsiao-ping to declare publicly that Vance’s visit to China caused setbacks in the Sino-American relationship. Chairman Hua termed the present phase of the relationship “vacillating, unstable, and conditional.” Since Vance’s visit neither President Carter nor any of his top foreign policy advisors have made mention of the Sino-American relationship.

When I visited China again in the summer of 1977, I found China’s attitude toward Washington to be one of anger. The Chinese are unhappy over what they feel to be Carter’s lack of enthusiasm for establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Carter administration seems to ignore the triangular diplomacy of the Nixon-Ford era.

Senator Edward Kennedy, who advocated full diplomatic relations with the PRC, visited China and held discussions with the Chinese leaders in January, 1978. Whether Kennedy’s mission will have any effect on the Carter administration’s China policy is yet to be seen. Senator Jackson has gone to China to discuss “energy problems,” but it may safely be assumed that Jackson, who is liked by the Chinese for his strong attitude toward Moscow, has definite opinions, not only on energy issues but also on the overall Sino-American relationship, now deadlocked over the Taiwan issue.

China now has internal unity and stability under a group of pragmatic leaders who were closely associated with the late premier Chou En-lai, the main negotiator in 1971-73 of the new Sino-American relationship. The post-Mao Chinese leaders are likely to follow the foreign policy that Mao and Chou pursued after the Cultural Revolution (1969-76). So there is no immediate threat to the collapse of the new Sino-American relations: Both China and the United States have some common objectives vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and in several tension areas of the Third World. China also recognizes that its good relations with Japan, the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia, and Western Europe are linked with its ties with Washington. Similarly, the U.S. still finds diplomatic options with Peking to be useful in dealing with the Russians.

But both China and the Soviet Union are unhappy with Carter’s foreign policy; no substantial progress, either in SALT II or in normalization of relations with Peking, has been made. Neither Moscow nor Peking is happy with Carter’s handling of the triangular diplomacy. Will common dissatisfaction with Washington lead the two Communist giants to move toward some limited rapprochement? It is the big question in the future pattern of the Washington-Moscow-Peking triangle, a relationship that has eased U.S. worries and anxieties on many global issues. It will be a tragedy if the triangular relationship is destroyed by any mistakes in U.S. policy toward Moscow and/or Peking.

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