

Tangled Triangle of Russia, China and the U.S.

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I recently attended a lecture given by a prominent U.S. political scientist, Sinologist and former high-ranking Pentagon official. He made a special trip to Moscow to warn us about an increasingly powerful China. The “Chinese dragon,” he said, has large ambitions and will try to dominate the world. He hinted at the need for Washington and Moscow to close ranks and start preparing for a joint defense against Chinese political and economic expansion.

His talk got me thinking about the shifting alliances that Moscow, Beijing and Washington have formed among themselves throughout the past 60 years.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Soviet-Chinese bloc emerged largely as a way to counterbalance the United States and the Western “imperialist” camp. But the friendship between the Soviet Union and China did not last long. Tensions between the two countries reached a low point in the 1960s when troops shot at each other across the Ussuri River along the Russian-Chinese border. China, which had significantly less power

than the Soviet Union, began looking for allies to oppose its former “big brother.”

By the late 1960s, the United States was mired in the Vietnam War and actively began courting the Chinese, fundamentally changing the dynamics of the Chinese-U.S.-Soviet triangle. Washington began delivering arms to and exchanging intelligence with Beijing. In addition, China’s transition toward market reforms, which began in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping, resulted in even greater support from Washington, with the United States determined to promote the transition of the Communist giant into a full-fledged member of the “free world.”

But this Washington-Beijing alliance proved short-lived for two reasons. First, the rise to power of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his “new thinking” led to a warming of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and this caused concern among China’s leaders. Second, China’s violent crackdown on protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989 caused a split in U.S.-Chinese relations. Washington immediately distanced itself from Beijing and simultaneously continued rapprochement with Moscow by trying to direct the Soviet Union along the path of a market economy and to draw it into the orbit of Western influence. After the Soviet Union collapsed and pro-Western democrats replaced Communist apparatchiks in the Kremlin, the United States worked to close ranks with Russia and to use the combined influence to pressure China into changing its political structure and policy.

But that idyllic picture of U.S.-Russian relations quickly fizzled out as well. Reveling in its victory in the Cold War and its clear military, political and economic superiority, the United States set its sights on global hegemony. This antagonized and alienated both Moscow and Beijing and created an opportunity for them to join forces once again to oppose U.S. hegemony.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks marked the beginning of the end of U.S. global domination. The U.S. fall from the stars was accelerated by its unsuccessful, taxing military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and the deep economic crisis.

By 2009, it became obvious that the “Pax Americana” global empire was a pipe dream, and the United States — now under the leadership of a more pragmatic and realistic President Barack Obama — began looking for new alliances. One of the Obama administration’s ideas was sharing the burden of responsibility for global security with China, whose economy continued to grow at full speed during the global crisis.

In February 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed creating a U.S.-

Chinese superpower alliance to collectively solve the most pressing global economic and political problems. But the Chinese leadership flatly rejected Clinton’s proposal. How could China possibly create an “axis” with the United States when both are locked in a fierce geopolitical rivalry and are unable to overcome thorns in the bilateral relationship such as the sale of U.S. weapons to Taiwan?

Even if these problems didn’t exist, a long-term U.S.-Chinese or Russian-Chinese alliance would be difficult to achieve. For one, after being burned by the failed alliances with Washington and Moscow, Beijing has vowed to avoid formal alliances with a superpower; this has become a cornerstone of China’s foreign policy. Second, China has historically vowed to

“fight against hegemony.” China has always insisted that it has no ambitions to become a hegemony and is opposed to any global domination by any superpower.

China learned its lesson in the early 1980s when, after cozying up to the United States to oppose the Soviet Union, it quickly realized the downside of this alliance — that it had a negative impact on China’s reputation in the Third World, which was China’s traditional basis of support and which shared Beijing’s opposition to U.S. hegemony.

Thus, Washington must come up with another way to preserve its dominant position in global affairs. If China doesn’t want to play ball, it could mean that it is intent on decreasing U.S. political and economic influence when and where it can. This is why many U.S. policymakers view China as the country’s largest threat.

How can the United States counter this threat? In part, with Russia’s help. And so, once again, Washington has courted Moscow to help the United States counterbalance China’s growing global influence. But the United States doesn’t realize that Russia has no interest in alienating China. Moscow is more interested in cooperating with Beijing than counterbalancing it, particularly when Russia’s primary goal is modernization.

Eighteenth-century French philosopher Charles de Montesquieu said, “Small counties perish from external enemies, and large countries perish from internal ones.” Russia has more than enough internal problems that it needs to solve without having to worry about conflicts with China. This is why a long-term U.S.-Russian alliance against China is as much of a nonstarter as a Russian-Chinese alliance against the United States. Therefore, the Russian-Chinese-U.S. triangle will remain as three separate centers for a long time to come.

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