Triangular Diplomacy in the Age of Putin, Xi and Trump

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

One of the hallmarks of the Cold War was the complex dynamic that played out among Washington, Moscow and Beijing, as each sought advantage by playing the others off of one another.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, that dynamic changed, but never really went away, as China’s economy — and military — emerged to rival that of the United States and Russia took a back seat economically. Still, the triangular relationship among the three countries persists and plays an important role in international affairs, writes Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

IN JANUARY 2019, the then Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats in the United States reported, quite accurately, that “China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s.” Chinese media agreed that relations with Russia were at “their best in history.” When Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Beijing in April, 2019, he and Chinese President Xi Jinping called their countries “good friends” and vowed to work together in areas ranging from trade to aerospace. Xi said that “Russia is an important partner in co-building the Belt and Road Initiative” and that the “two countries should strengthen international co-operation and adhere to multilateralism.” Putin offered his support for the Beijing-led initiative, saying Xi had “built an important platform for expanding international co-operation.” Putin added that “Russia is willing to strengthen changes and cooperation, and work with China in energy, connectivity and other major projects.”

Following Putin’s visit to Beijing, Russian and Chinese ships, submarines, planes and marine units conducted a week of joint maneuvers called “Joint Sea 2019.” The exercises followed participation in September 2018 of some 3,200 Chinese troops in Russia’s largest-ever war games, in Siberia, where nearly 300,000 Russian troops conducted drills amid rising tensions with NATO. Visiting Moscow in June 2019, Xi noted, “Russia is the country that I have visited the most times, and President Putin is my best friend and colleague.” What should outsiders make of this ostensible solidarity?

Russia, China, and the United States in the early 21st century remain the world’s three greatest military powers. Although Russia has stagnated economically for decades, China has steadily grown in material terms and now equals or surpasses the US in gross national product. But if Russia and China work together, their combined assets — military, geopolitical, technological, financial — could produce mighty tools to use against the US and its allies, in Europe and worldwide.

How likely is this scenario? Let us review the relevant background.

HISTORY’S MARCH

During the Second World War, the US was allied with Soviet Russia against Adolf Hitler and with Nationalist China against Japan. By the late 1940s and during the Korean War, however, the US was at war, not just with Mao Zedong’s China but also with Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union, which supplied arms to North Korea and pilots to fight US bombers. Stalin and Mao signed an alliance on Valentine’s Day 1950 that led Americans to imagine that “monolithic” Communism threatened the “Free World.” US leaders did not know or fully appreciate how tenuous was the Sino-Soviet alliance and how bitter were the resentments Mao felt toward Stalin and later toward Soviet Party leader Nikita S. Khrushchev. Washington did not know that Khrushchev in October 1957 had promised a sample atomic bomb to Mao in exchange for his declaration that “the USSR is the leader of the Communist movement” — only to slowly backtrack and finally suspend all aid programs to China in 1959-1960. (This process was described in my book The Arms Race and Sino-Soviet Relations [1968] and confirmed in the memoir of Nie Rong Zhen, head of China’s nuclear and missile programs, 1958-1970.)

Despite Moscow’s duplicitous double-game, China persisted and tested its first atomic bomb in October 1964 — the same month that Khrushchev’s comrades ousted him for “hare-brained” policies. China’s nuclear development, however, had led Washington and Moscow in 1963 to consider some kind of intervention to stop it. As late as 1970, the Kremlin contemplated a surgical strike to destroy China’s nuclear facilities. By the time that Richard Nixon became US president in 1969, it was clear that there was no longer a meaningful Sino-Soviet alliance. Nixon’s National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, espoused triangular diplomacy — pitting Beijing and Moscow against each other in an effort to gain support for US objectives. The US goals included ending the Indo-China War on terms acceptable to Washington and capping its nuclear arms race with the USSR. But neither Beijing nor Moscow had much influence in Indo-China and Washington finally withdrew in disgrace. Kissinger and Nixon did establish a sort of entente with Beijing in 1971-72, but Kissinger’s effort to leverage China did not contribute to the “SALT I” arms accords with Leonid Brezhnev’s Kremlin in 1972. These agreements took shape because they satisfied the strategic needs of both Washington and Moscow. Kissinger’s triangular diplomacy

1 For a visual display of the five major projects of the Belt and Road Initiative, which — like Marco Polo — involves Italy, see the South China Morning Post article “Plugging China into Europe” at multimedia.scmp.com/news/china/article/One-Belt-One-Road/europe.html
added to the weight of cynicism in world politics, but was not needed for Washington to have more normal relations with Beijing or for arms controls with Moscow.

In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter sought to inject more idealism and concern for human rights into US policies, but his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski favored a tough Realpolitik. He thought détente with Moscow was a chimera and so worked for a real entente with Beijing. Washington in 1979 shifted diplomatic “recognition” from Nationalist China (based in Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China in Beijing. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, this brought new intensity to US-Soviet hostility, reinforced by Chinese opposition to Moscow’s Afghan intervention. Washington’s relationship with Moscow remained very tense as President Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980, faced off against an ailing Brezhnev followed by two other sclerotic general secretaries. When Mikhail Gorbachev became the paramount Soviet leader in 1985, however, he and Reagan became partners in reversing the arms race and nearly ending the Cold War. Gorbachev also sought to restore good relations with China, but the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 set back China’s ties with Moscow as well as with the US.

What is known as Deng Xiaoping’s “24-Character Strategy” first emerged in 1990 in response both to the global backlash from the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and to the Chinese Communist Party’s sense of alarm following the collapse of the Communist states of Eastern Europe. Deng advised his comrades:

> Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and hide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership. Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile. Never take the lead — but aim to do something big.

On the other hand, Deng also declared:

> China is not a superpower, nor will she ever seek to be one. If one day China should change her color and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialist, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it.

Beijing blamed Gorbachev’s reformist soft line for the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989-1991, but Deng also courted the US. Washington welcomed signs that China was ready to join the club of nations and helped China join the World Trade Organization. But the logic of keeping a low profile changed when Xi Jinping became Communist Party general secretary in 2012. The country’s policies became even tougher at home and abroad after Xi became president in 2014. In October 2017, he said: “It is time for us to take center stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind.” China was “standing tall and firm in the east.” A “flourishing” economic model of socialism with Chinese characteristics offered a “new choice” for the developing world.

**THE SITUATION TODAY**

Closer ties between Beijing and Moscow developed further after 2017 as each encountered a tense, unpredictable and potentially antagonistic relationship with the administration of Donald Trump. However, the scale of Sino-Russian trade remains limited. Chinese investment in Russia has declined in recent years, even though trade between the two countries in 2018 rose 24.5 per cent to a record US$108 billion — due largely to greater Russian oil and gas exports, making it China’s largest energy supplier. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China invested 2.58 billion yuan (US$370 million) in building its part of a bridge over the Amur River to link Heihe in Heilongjiang Province and the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk, which could further facilitate transport of agricultural products from Russia to China.

In response to the escalation of Trump’s trade war, China significantly reduced its imports of liquefied natural gas from the US in 2019. Only two vessels made the trip from the US to China in early 2019 — one in January and one in February — compared to 14 during the last four months of 2018, before the trade war accelerated. Meanwhile, US trade with Russia, never very substantial, also declined.

Today’s Sino-Russian flirtation could be fleeting. The greater likelihood is that each party will keep its options open. Journalist Melinda Liu, writing in *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 3, 2019, suggests that, for Chinese leaders, the three-way geopolitical dynamic between Beijing, Moscow and Washington was anticipated in China’s classic tale, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In this 14th-century epic, Luo Guanzhong tells a story of warfare and deceit among three competing fiefdoms, 2,000 years ago. After the fall of the Han dynasty, the kingdoms of Shu, Wu, and Wei battled and circled one another in a dance of alliance, betrayal, enmity and realignment. This tale of human ambition and ruthlessness describes each king’s personality traits and traditional battlefield tactics that still pop up in Chinese diplomacy, corporate negotiations and popular internet games. It seems the opening lines from the revised 1679 edition of the *Romance* cannot be far from Xi’s mind: “The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.” Neither unity nor division is permanent; they are forever feeding serious threats from Beijing and Moscow as each pursues expansion.

It is unlikely that China and Russia will collaborate in any deep sense against the US and its allies. Western states do face serious threats from Beijing and Moscow as each pursues expansion.
ships through the South China Sea close to Chinese occupied islands to demonstrate that those waters remain “international” and open to all peaceful shipping. But none of these countermeasures are sufficiently strong to compel Beijing and Moscow to pull back. None are as strong as those the United Nations Security Council has mandated against North Korea for its weapons tests. Of course, no one wishes to risk a major war with China or Russia. But a common front is made more difficult also by Trump’s deference in many domains to Putin and Xi, with each of whom he claims to enjoy a special relationship.

The bargaining power of Washington and its allies is weakened not only by the sauvet qui peut tendency of each partner; the failure of most US allies to pay a fair share for mutual security; and the inconsistent and emotionally driven policies of today’s US president.

Neither China, Russia nor the US needs more hard power or wealth to improve the quality of life for its people. Each could profit from equitable trade and collaboration on common problems such as climate change. Mutual gain — not exploitation — should be their guiding principle — at home and worldwide. For now, however, each country behaves like the hard-line aggressors in the Prisoner’s Dilemma of game theory who defect and then lose, when co-operation would have netted consistent if moderate gains.

Walter C. Clemens, Jr. is Associate, Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Boston University. His most recent book is North Korea and the World: Human Rights, Arms Control, and Strategies for Negotiation (University Press of Kentucky, 2016). Email: wclemens@bu.edu