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## BUILDING FORWARD BETTER AFTER THE RAIN

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# THE TRIANGLE AS METAPHOR

## RUSSIA, AMERICA, CHINA

Andrey Sushentsov

*Why, with all the hopeful possibilities engendered by the end of the Cold War, should East-West relations become centered on the question of who would be allied with whom and, by implication, against whom in some fanciful, totally unforeseeable, and most improbable future military conflict?*

– George F. Kennan

**I**NTERNATIONAL politics experts seek to determine the nature of contemporary relations between Russia, the United States, and China. To understand them, we need take a brief dive into conflict theory.

There are two types of competition: strategic (aggressive, hostile) and natural. Strategic competition is distinguished by the fact that it is an active program of action, supported by resources, and aimed at significant favorable changes in the existing balance. Strategic competition is revolutionary: it happens quickly, over a short period of time, and gravely threatens opponents' interests.

Natural competition, on the other hand, is evolutionary. It is reactive, opportunistic, and relatively slow. Noticeable changes in the international system, resulting from its course, can take a very long time. As such, natural competition is not life-threatening for opponents.

**D**uring the first two decades after the Cold War, the world saw two successive stages of U.S. strategic competition in Eurasia. In the 1990s, it was a strategy to expand the liberal world order in Europe. Its concrete results were NATO expansion, the creation and development of the European Union, and the inclusion of some post-Soviet states in the orbit of the West's

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Photo: Chinadaily.com.cn

*Drawing the contours of Angles A and B at the recent Geneva Summit.*

influence. This policy, while not aimed directly against Russia, affected its vital interests.

The 2000s saw the beginning of the second stage of U.S. strategic competition in Eurasia. The focus of America's attention shifted to the Middle East. George W. Bush's Republican sidekicks pursued a campaign for regime change and the "spread of democracy" in the region. In the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, they backed radical changes and did not hesitate to use force. Although these policies were not directed exactly against Russia either, they also affected Russia's strategic interests.

When Barack Obama entered the White House, the United States began to retreat from conducting its strategic activities in Eurasia. To a large extent, this happened under the influence of heavy expenditures and the significant economic and domestic political repercussions of these campaigns for the United States itself.

**I**n the 2010s, American policy in Eurasia began to shift towards natural competition. It became more opportunistic and reactive. Responding to the Arab Spring, which undermined the legitimacy of many American allies in the Middle East, the United States had



to act amid conditions of uncertainty, often contradicting itself and worsening the environment for pursuing its own interests. This was the case, for example, in Egypt, where the United States was forced to betray its ally Hosni Mubarak and put up with Islamist rule, albeit for a short time, before offering the local military its blessing to carry out a military coup. In Libya and Syria, America has consistently avoided a strategy that would resemble its invasions of Iraq or Afghanistan, given how costly and ineffective they were.

*Obviously, there is a conflict in the relations between Russia and the West—but of what kind?*

In relations with Russia, the competition was also natural. However, it was during Obama's presidency that Ukraine faced its most significant internal political crisis, which quickly became internationalized. The United States played an essential role in it, and this led to an unprecedented clash with Russia. However, the fact that the United States did not take advantage of the situation in order to form a military alliance with Ukraine—in other words, to deploy its military forces on the territory of that country—shows the limits of American strategic intentions regarding that country.

When Donald Trump was sworn in as President of the United States, the next stage of American strategic competition began—this time,

against China. In pursuing this strategy, the United States imposed disciplinary sanctions on its allies and unleashed a wide range of trade wars against not only opponents but also its own allies. This indirectly affected Russian interests, as, for example, in relation to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The anti-Russian sanctions were adopted rather against Trump's wishes and were caused by the shock experienced by the American political establishment after an unwanted president was elected in 2016.

Since then, the United States has been in a deep political crisis that has sharply shifted its national priorities from those relating to foreign policy to those concerning domestic stability. Public support for increased military spending and military interventions abroad has nosedived, with analysts noting that newly developed hypersonic weapons can make the U.S. Navy useless or highly vulnerable.

Apart from that, while the shale gas revolution has given the United States a decisive advantage in the energy market, its energy self-sufficiency has enabled it to concentrate much more on its own problems, since American security no longer depends on developments in the Middle East. Now that the United States has become a leading

oil exporter and a major gas producer, the world has barely noticed the sharp decline in oil supplies from Iran and Venezuela and the temporary lulls in supplies from Saudi Arabia after the attack on its oil facilities.

As for Russia, it has not been voluntarily engaged in strategic competition against the United States since the end of the Cold War. If this were the case, Russia would now be actively present in Latin America, for example, expanding its zone of influence and striving to change the balance of power in this region in its favor. Russia's actions in most episodes were reactive in nature and were implemented in response to political processes initiated or backed by the United States, primarily near Russian borders.

#### **DRAWING THE CONTOURS OF A TRIANGLE: ANGLES A AND B**

Obviously, there is a conflict in the relations between Russia and the West—but of what kind? Some experts draw parallels with the early Cold War: the period of the Korean War and the Cuban missile crisis; others focus on the later period of the Cold War, which was accompanied by agreements on the limitation of strategic arms and the Helsinki process.

*Two decades of consistent pressure have instilled in Russian elites a notion that only through strategic competition and, if necessary, through force and pressure can foreign policy be conducted.*

In fact, both analogies are wrong. For example, although today we are witnessing the destruction of the arms limitation regimes, Russian and American troops simultaneously engage in military operations in Syria without fighting against each other.

Yet, there is a conflict afoot, as Russia and the United States are vying for influence and status globally, clashing for valuable resources in Eurasia. This confrontation is particularly acute along Russia's borders because it affects the vital interests of this country. Two decades of consistent pressure have instilled in Russian elites a notion that only through strategic competition and, if necessary, through force and pressure can foreign policy be conducted.

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to define this confrontation in historical terms. We are witnessing a new type of relations between Russia and the United States: a new point on the spectrum which encompasses different varieties of conflict. The core objective of this rivalry is to define new rules for organizing a common international system. The term "competition," which first appeared in Russia's 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, is suitable for describing this new type of relationship.

During a competition, states determine how exactly the world will be structured: who will be the enforcer of the rules under which it operates and who will become the principal beneficiary of their implementation.

In this new type of confrontation, the United States has made use of a broad application of sanctions. It was during Trump's presidency that a whole range of sanctions were imposed on Russia. Although Trump did not initiate the process that led to them, he may have caused them indirectly; and since then, sanctions have been imposed on Russia up to this day.

There is widespread opinion in Russia that the Western countries have a common and effective strategy aimed at deterring and destroying it. However, there is increasing evidence that the collective West finds it difficult to maintain unity. Discussions between leading politicians and intellectuals in the NATO countries show that the West is beset with strategic discord and confusion. This strategic confusion is increasingly resuscitating ideas that seemed impossible only a decade ago. In a recent series of statements, the

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French President urged a revision of containment priorities vis-à-vis Russia and suggested starting a dialogue with it. The German chancellor has made similar statements. These and others like it are based on the premise that the West needs Russia to maintain its place in the world leadership.

Nevertheless, this strategic priority—even if formulated as a strategic goal in the doctrines of the leading NATO countries—is clouded by a number of contradictory statements by their governments and, most importantly, by attempts to interfere in Russia's internal affairs. The line between the systematic sanctions regime and preparing for a color revolution is thin. There is no guarantee that sanctions will become redundant as a tool of Western policies regarding Russia in the foreseeable future.

This can be illustrated by the experience of 2012 when the Obama Administration persuaded the U.S. Congress to cancel the Jackson-Vanik Amendment (1974) and adopt on the same day the Magnitsky Act that imposed sanctions on a number of senior Russian executives. Russian analysts believe that anti-Russia sanctions will be extended in the future following the

same pattern, even if some sort of settlement of the conflict in Ukraine is reached. America's policy regarding the Iran nuclear deal does not persuade Russian leaders that the West is a reliable partner either: Washington first supported this deal but later withdrew from it, and even threatened to impose secondary sanctions on any country that adheres to it.

The issue of whether the West needs Russia raises the following questions: is this need long-term? In other words, isn't Russia just a tool for the West in its confrontation with China?

If the answer is "yes," such strategy has no future. A key test of its viability would be the West's reaction should an internal crisis in Russia break out. Judging from recent developments, the West will be very unlikely to resist the temptation to use such an internal conflict to support social protest so as to eventually turn it into a color revolution similar to the one in Ukraine.

All in all, unless the Western countries realize that for Russia any interference in its domestic affairs is unacceptable, no progress in the relations between Russia and the West is to be expected. In fact, non-interference is one of the main pillars of Russia-China relations, which

have risen to a level of strategic partnership—some that can hardly be reached in Russia-West relations.

**ANGLE C WILL DETERMINE THE TYPE OF TRIANGLE**

Soon after Trump assumed office, China was declared the main competitor of the United States. His administration will go down in history for its long series of grotesque statements of this kind, such as a number of senior U.S. government officials delivering keynote speeches criticizing China.

This culminated in a speech by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered in July 2020 at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum that explored the results of half a century of U.S.-China rapprochement. In his speech, he summarized the key messages of his colleagues: National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, FBI Director Chris Wray, and Attorney General William Barr. Pompeo's key points of criticism of China were centered on the imbalances in bilateral relations and Beijing's alleged focus on global hegemony. Pompeo vigorously criticized former U.S. administrations for their "blind trust approach" to cooperation and put forward a new principle regarding relations with China—one

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based on the reliable verification of its actions and a careful analysis of possible consequences.

After this series of speeches given by American politicians, experts started talking about the beginning of a new ‘Cold War’ between the United States and China.

However, contemporary U.S.-China relations lack a number of significant features that characterized the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, namely a struggle for global military and political domination, a fundamental ideological confrontation, and a clash between different world views. At the core of the Cold War stood a global geopolitical confrontation, which manifested itself in acute military and political crises that played out in various regions of the world as well as in the form of an arms race. At the same time, the economic interdependence of different parts of the world was extremely low, which made it possible to conduct politics in the zero-sum game mode.

In the current situation, we are witnessing a different picture. The current standoff between the United States and China is rather about leadership in formulating the rules of interaction within

a common global system framework—it is not about hegemony. The element that illustrates the scale of the U.S.-China crisis quite well was the then-U.S. Secretary of State’s remark that among Chinese transgressions was the demand

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that companies like Marriott, American Airlines, Delta, and United remove the name “Taiwan” from their websites “so as not to anger Beijing.” Is this what a “new Cold War” is all about?

Yet, current trends remind us of one aspect of the bipolar sys-

tem, namely that power remains an important factor in international relations, which leads to a new regionalization of markets and exacerbates competition for control over them in the West.

In fact, the United States is trying to maintain its leadership in the current global system, while China is explicitly seeking to expand its influence. There is a “decoupling” of their economic mechanisms as they are widening the distance from each other, but there is not a complete rupture of ties. This process is hindered by the close economic interdependence that has developed over half a century, when even a one percentage point slowdown in the Chinese economy has large-scale socioeconomic consequences around the

world, including in the United States. After all, modern China does not pose an ideological challenge to the United States and behaves somewhat conciliatory in the face of American pressure.

The anti-Chinese theses of the Trump Administration had a significant domestic political dimension. The argument about China’s “unfair behavior” had been developed by Donald Trump for decades: it had been featured in his earliest interviews as a businessman. However, as a profitable electoral program, the anti-Chinese strategy was put forward by the headquarters of Trump’s advisers only in 2019. Yet, it was assumed that this strategy would have been implemented while the American economy would be successfully developing. Trump could boast of high growth rates right until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

In these conditions, the Republicans were struggling to achieve internal political mobilization in order to pursue the thesis of a “Chinese threat” among both the elites and society. The pandemic did mix up all the cards and removed from the table the most significant asset Trump accumulated during his presidency: his economic achievements.

Today the fundamental goals of Washington’s strategy towards Beijing include correcting trade, economic, and technological imbalances; preventing China’s attempts to establish hegemony in East Asia and beyond; and preserving American leadership in the twenty-first century.

*China’s world order metaphor is consonant with the concepts of its philosophy in which a benevolent ruler should not be noticed.*

Such pressure on China is not the best approach for many reasons, mainly because it compels Beijing to make a choice. This is exactly what China wants to avoid. China’s world order

metaphor is consonant with the concepts of its philosophy in which a benevolent ruler should not be noticed. China is not after a confrontation and considers globalization a major ally. Moreover, Beijing does not have the experience of expansion compared to the European colonial empires, including Russia. China will have to acquire this strategic experience before we are able to describe what its power politics look like. But for now, China is avoiding confrontation. Washington’s alarmism may lead to a situation in which Beijing will have no alternative, forcing it to break decades-long ties at a moment’s notice.

Thus, irritation, anxiety, and rejection of the U.S.-proposed items comprising the basis of its global strategy for the twenty-first century are

unlikely to serve as an effective strategic program. To bring domestic elites and allies around to this program, the United States had to put forward a vision that would appeal to everyone. However, the version of the program proposed by Pompeo resembled a poorly-developed strategy that did not rely on the broad support of domestic elites and foreign allies, which the U.S. will need unless it wants to find itself alone in standing up to China.

The United States keeps trying hard to keep China at bay, but this objective is not shared by its European allies who want to cooperate with Beijing on technological progress and see an economic opportunity in China's rise. This idea prevails over the few appeals to see China's threat as common to all Western countries.

Many analysts think that this strategic discord in the West—which manifested itself during Trump's presidency—was due to his extravagant behavior; but they also tend to believe that his successor, Joe Biden, will fail to smooth it over. Even assuming Trump's political instincts were right, the consequences of his moves dealt a crushing blow to the Western solidarity: the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership even though it could have been an effective economic tool for containing China in Asia. And while Trump should have tried to break up the

political link between Russia and China, his administration viewed both of them as equal threats to the United States.

### LINES BETWEEN THE ANGLES

In this highly volatile situation, Moscow has made a strategic choice in favor of increasing its multidimensional cooperation with Beijing.

At the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, officially confirmed that Moscow was helping China develop a missile attack early warning system. Until now, such systems have been operated only by Russia and the United States. This new level of Russian-Chinese military cooperation will have truly global implications.

Moscow's decision to establish an early warning system in China is strategic in nature, as it is aimed at consolidating China's sovereignty and Beijing's ability to resist American pressure—which Russia views as running counter to its international and domestic interests, and is trying to oppose.

Moscow believes that a system of checks and balances is more stable and democratic than a unipolar world. The way to build such a system consists in the consolidation of the sovereignty and power of those countries that want to play an independent role in the world arena.

That is why relations with China occupy a special place in Russia's strategy. Metaphorically, these countries stand back-to-back, looking in opposite directions: Russia, toward Europe, and China, toward the Pacific. This is only natural, since 75 percent of Russia's GDP and population are located in its European part, while about 80 percent of China's GDP and population are concentrated in a broad band along the Pacific.

Their efforts may face opposite directions, but this community of strategic cultures explains the absence of the key irritant in their own relations: the security frontier. Russia and China are not competing for Kazakhstan or Mongolia like Russia competes with the West for Ukraine, where every political cycle ends with a crisis. This is partly due to the fact that the border between Russia and China is located in their respective peripheral territories: China's most advanced areas are far from the Russian border and its demographic pressure in the north is minimal. Moreover, the Chinese are careful in the areas where the interests of the two countries could clash. As its ultimate goal, Russia would like to establish this kind of relationship with its partners in the West by proposing a treaty on European security, taking into account mutual interests, and renouncing the bloc principle in ensuring security in Europe.

The Russia-China *entente* is based on the realistic understanding that military power is still a valid component of international relations and that stability in central Eurasia can only be guaranteed through a consensus between the militarily strongest countries. Russia considers this type of relationship to be a prototype for establishing a stable security framework along its borders and on the rest of the continent. Russia's peace initiative for the Middle East, its security proposal for the Asia-Pacific Region, and its European security treaty idea all bear this out.

Against the backdrop of the Washington-Beijing confrontation, Moscow is striving to play an independent role and avoid creating a tough bipolar system. At this point, it does not want to strike a military alliance with Beijing, although many of its steps could be interpreted that way. Russia pursues an independent policy in Eurasia, with its resources allowing it to do so. However, should American pressure on China make Beijing engage in confrontation and resort to power politics, this would lead to a new reconfiguration of the international order and leave Russia with complex issues.

Of course, this scenario is not the only alternative, and judging by Moscow's assistance in developing a missile warning system, Russian leaders believe that Beijing really needs a shield to contain an American onslaught. ●