

## THE SHIFTING GLOBAL GEO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: CHINA, RUSSIA AND THE US IN A NEW ERA OF COMPETITION

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**Abstract.** This research examines the strategic triangle of China, Russia, and the United States, clarifying how China's rise and Russia's resurgence condition the U.S.'s strategic response within this interdependent triad. It posits that a 'dual-containment paradox' where the U.S. is trying to contain both China and Russia concurrently, strengthens their alignment inadvertently, and intensifies competition. China's military and economic ascent challenge U.S. hegemony, while Russia's revisionist course exploits these tensions, fostering Sino-Russian collaboration in economic and diplomatic domains. The U.S. containment drives their convergence instead of isolating them, amplifying their counterweight to American hegemony. Strategic overextension and alliance fatigue plague the U.S., signaling dual containment's unsustainability. This suggests a pivot to focused engagement, managing rivalry without cementing an anti-U.S. bloc. In this triadic dynamic, multipolarity self-sustains: China's leverage, Russia's disruptions, and U.S. overreach thwart any single hegemon, yielding a global order of persistent yet bounded competition, where each power's moves reshape the triangle's fragile balance.

**Keywords:** great powers competition, China's rise, Russian resurgence, the US response, geopolitics

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## 1. Introduction

The post-Cold War geopolitical landscape has changed, and great power rivalry is once again a defining feature of the international security environment (Lovelace 2016: 5). The great power rivalry has been evolved with the dynamics of strategic triangle of US-USSR / Russia-China. The Cold War, which raged between the U.S. and the then USSR from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, was a bipolar conflict characterized by political, ideological, and military rivalry (Knutsen 2020). The Warsaw Pact, under Soviet leadership, and the NATO alliance, spearheaded by the United States, found themselves in a confrontation characterized by conventional military forces and the deployment of theater nuclear weapons (Gheorghe 2022). The military aspect was most visible in Europe, and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cold War reached its conclusion (Miles 2024). A unipolar world dominated by the United States as the sole superpower characterized the post-Cold War era (Brooks and Wohlforth 2023). Within the strategic triangle, this marked a temporary collapse of the U.S.-Soviet-China dynamic, sidelining Russia and leaving China dormant, unable to challenge U.S. primacy or the American-led liberal world order (Lovelace 2016: 8). However, the current state of international security is one of shifting geopolitical dynamics, marked by heightened competition between China, Russia, and the U.S. (Zhang 2023). Instead of unipolarity or bipolarity, a new multipolar international order is evolving, driven by the triangle's revived interdependence.

Over the previous two decades, the US has faced numerous challenges, such as the unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a financial crisis, polarization in politics, and the isolationist leadership of Donald Trump (Brooks and Wohlforth 2023). In the meantime, China's economy has expanded dramatically, and militarily, it has become stronger than ever (Auslin 2020). Economically, currently, China has achieved upper-middle-income status. In the triangle, this economic surge – reaching \$35.29 trillion in PPP terms by 2024, surpassing the U.S.'s \$28.78 trillion (IMF 2024) – shifts power, challenging U.S. dominance and offering Russia an economic partner to offset Western isolation. China's \$3.51 trillion export economy and \$1 trillion trade surplus in 2024 (Bradsher 2025) make it a global trade linchpin (Kastner and Pearson 2021), compelling the U.S. to pivot defensively while Russia aligns pragmatically. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), now the world's second-most powerful military (Smura 2024), bolsters this shift, projecting power and forcing U.S. recalibrations, illustrating how China's rise conditions the triad's balance.

Despite this, the US leadership has been viewed as being challenged by Russia's resurgence as well (Brooks and Wohlforth 2023). With a powerful military and the largest nuclear stockpiles in the world (Kristensen et al. 2024), Russia has pursued a revisionist course marked by military buildup and interventions in the Middle East (Syria) and the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, and Crimea) (Charalambides 2022). The goals of Russian foreign policy are to maintain its standing as one of the "Great Powers" in the international arena and to make sure that many powers

of comparable stature oversee world affairs (Herd 2010). In the triangle, Russia's resurgence exploits U.S.-China tensions, countering American hegemony with military assertiveness and aligning with China to advocate multipolarity (Herd 2022). This conditions U.S. containment efforts and strengthens China's hand, highlighting the triad's mutual influence and signaling the limits of U.S. unipolar control. Furthermore, this triadic shift affects both global and regional orders, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where China's maritime aspirations undermine U.S.-led security frameworks, and in Eurasia, where Sino-Russian economic partnerships alter power dynamics, which has been taken as a threat to the stability of American hegemony throughout Asia and beyond. China's rise could significantly alter the geopolitical triangle, presumably surpassing the U.S.'s influence and reshaping the global power dynamics as its economic and military might continue to expand unchecked.

The post-Cold War changes in the global geostrategic environment necessitated reconsideration of the U.S. foreign and defense policies and missions. Similarly, the fresh change in the global security landscape may also have a variety of effects on U.S. defense strategies and initiatives. The current research thus seeks to explain how the rise of China and the Russia resurgence reshape international security and the global balance of power, using a strategic triangle framework to analyze their interactions with the United States. Furthermore, it analyzes how the United States is adapting to these trends and the possible consequences for the future global order. The study asserts that the Rise of China and the resurgence of Russia signify the emergence of a 'dual-containment paradox', wherein the United States' simultaneous efforts to contain both China and Russia within the strategic triangle unintentionally foster their strategic alignment, thereby intensifying rather than alleviating global security competition. When a hegemon attempts to concurrently constrain two rival powers, it compels them to form a counterbalancing coalition despite their geo-political differences. Instead of limiting their influence, U.S. 'dual containment' promotes more collaboration between China and Russia across military, economic, and diplomatic spheres, therefore reinforcing organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, while augmenting joint military exercises.

In addition, the security situation is worsening everywhere. U.S. policies in the Indo-Pacific region push for closer military ties between Russia and China, while economic restrictions make Russia even more reliant on Chinese finance and trade. This overreach results in a decrease in U.S. strategic capacity, reflecting historical examples of great-power overextension, where the effort to manage several opponents eventually undermines hegemonic stability. Within the triangle, this paradox drives a Sino-Russian axis that the U.S. cannot easily fracture, unlike Cold War triangulation. Consequently, the U.S. faces the danger of alliance fatigue, as partners such as NATO, AUKUS, and Quad seek more independence or are reluctant to completely align with U.S. strategic objectives in light of rising threats. Essentially, this indicates that 'dual containment' is not viable, and the U.S. will ultimately have to move toward focused engagement, handling competition without reinforcing an anti-U.S. coalition. In this context, multipolarity becomes self-sustaining, as the convergence

of great powers and U.S. overextension hinder any single entity from attaining global hegemony, resulting in a global system characterized by ongoing but limited strategic competition, shaped by the triangle's relentless interplay.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

The Strategic Triangle theory, originally proposed by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s during his tenure as U.S. Secretary of State, is applied to exploring the intricate dynamics among Soviet Union, China, and the United States, three central powers whose interactions define global security and geo-strategic stability during the Cold War (Kissinger 2011). The Strategic Triangle frames these states as interdependent actors, where each one's behavior – China's rise, Russia's resurgence, or the U.S. response – hinges on its relationships with the other two, creating a fluid system of influence and counteraction (Dittmer 1981). Key to this framework is the concept of triadic interdependence, where shifts in one bilateral tie, such as Sino-Russian cooperation, ripple across the triangle, altering U.S. calculations and vice versa (Wohlforth 2014). Each state plays a distinct role – China as a rising power reshaping the balance, Russia as a resurgent pivot leveraging its position, and the U.S. as an established hegemon striving to maintain its power and influence – while their collective actions drive systemic outcomes (Mearsheimer 2019).

Furthermore, the theory assumes that no state operates in isolation; Russia's energy diplomacy and military moves respond to U.S.-China tensions (Trenin 2016), China's economic outreach and territorial claims adjust to U.S.-Russia friction (Lampton 2019), and the U.S.'s alliances and countermeasures reflect Sino-Russian dynamics (Allison 2017). This relational power structure remains adaptive, with each state recalibrating its strategy based on the others' moves, ensuring the triangle's fluidity over a fixed equilibrium (Kissinger 2011). The framework proposes that Russia's resurgence – through territorial assertions, energy leverage, and alignment with China – positions it as a swing player exploiting U.S.-China rivalry (Lo 2015), while China's rise – via infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, maritime expansion, and technological growth – transforms the triangle, pulling Russia closer to counter U.S. dominance (Economy 2018). Meanwhile, the U.S. responds with military presence, economic restrictions, and coalition-building to anchor its role, managing the Sino-Russian axis to prevent a tilt against its interests (Campbell and Ratner 2018).

This lens reveals how Russia's resurgence provokes U.S. reactions that influence China's Indo-Pacific plans (Kaplan 2013), or how China's Belt and Road Initiative prompts U.S. containment efforts that shape Russia's European opportunities, illustrating a web of mutual conditioning (Rolland 2017). The Strategic Triangle theory justifies its relevance by capturing these third-party effects, unlike simpler dyadic models, and adapts Kissinger's Cold War framework (U.S.-USSR-China) to today's context of Russia's resurgence, China's ascent, and U.S. adaptation (Kissinger 2011). Though it risks overlooking secondary players like the EU or

non-state factors like global crises (Ikenberry 2018), its focus on triadic interplay provides a powerful tool for analysis. In conclusion, the Strategic Triangle theory frames Russia as a resurgent, China as a rising challenger, and the U.S. as an existing hegemon, offering a clear, relational perspective to dissect how their interdependent strategies shape the evolving global landscape.

### **3. The rise of China in the strategic triangle**

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 inaugurated a fleeting era of U.S. unipolarity, from 1990 to 2008, during which the United States dominated the global stage unchallenged by a peer rival. This dominance waned as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis exposed U.S. economic vulnerabilities, accelerating China's rise as a counterweight (Roper 2024). Within the strategic triangle of China, the United States, and Russia, China deftly exploited this shift. Massive foreign direct investment flowed into China, lured by low wages and the absence of independent trade unions (Chan et al. 2020), while its trade surpluses and WTO accession in 2002 – facilitated by reduced trade barriers – solidified its economic rise (Boden 2012). The roots of this trajectory trace back to 1978, when Deng Xiaoping's reforms dismantled the Stalinist centralized command economy, pivoting China toward a neoliberal, pro-Western economic model adapted with 'Chinese characteristics' (Jinping 2022). This strategic reorientation yielded dramatic results: China's GDP surged from \$303 billion in 1980 to over \$1 trillion by 1998, reaching \$18.53 trillion by 2024 (IMF 2024). Analytically, China's economic rise recalibrated the strategic triangle. It diminished U.S. economic hegemony, offering China leverage to challenge American influence in global markets, while Russia – though militarily potent – remained a secondary economic player, often aligning with China to counterbalance U.S. power. This shift not only positioned China as the world's second-largest economy but also amplified its capacity to shape the global economic order, forcing the U.S. to contend with a rival capable of wielding a formidable economic stick, while Russia capitalized on the resulting tensions to bolster its own strategic relevance.

#### *3.1. Deng Xiaoping's transformative reforms and the strategic triangle*

Deng Xiaoping's ascent at the 11th Communist party of China (CPC) Central Committee's third plenary session on December 18, 1978, marked a pivotal reorientation of China's trajectory, launching its reform and opening-up policies. Rejecting Mao's centrally planned economy and its ideological rigidity (Kissinger 2012), Deng embraced a pragmatic, neoliberal-inspired model tailored to Chinese conditions. This shift – from Stalinist autarky to market-driven growth – propelled China into the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle as a dynamic player. By prioritizing consumer goods over heavy industry, decentralizing economic control, and unshackling agricultural ingenuity through the dismantling of collective farming (Hart and Spero 2010), Deng unleashed productivity surges that bolstered rural incomes and laid the groundwork for industrial experimentation. These reforms positioned

China to exploit U.S.-led globalization while distancing itself from Russia's faltering Soviet model, subtly aligning Beijing's interests with Western markets without fully committing to U.S. ideological dominance.

The "four modernizations" – agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense – further amplified China's strategic leverage. In agriculture, granting farmers land-use rights and surplus retention (Hart and Spero 2010) not only secured food self-sufficiency but also signaled to the U.S. and Russia that China could sustain its population independently, reducing reliance on external aid or alliances. Industrially, devolving planning to local levels (Hart and Spero 2010) enhanced adaptability, enabling China to outpace Russia's sclerotic command economy and challenge U.S. manufacturing dominance over time. In science and technology, Deng reversed the Cultural Revolution's educational stagnation, launching crash programs for 800,000 researchers in fields like genetics and space technology (Keo 2020). By encouraging study abroad and reverse-engineering foreign innovations (Kissinger 2012), China absorbed Western know-how – particularly from the U.S. – while avoiding Russia's technological isolation, positioning itself as a future industrial powerhouse.

Militarily, Deng's modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) through demobilization and investment in dual-use technologies transformed China from a land-bound force into a sophisticated power capable of projecting influence (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024). This shift directly altered the strategic triangle: the U.S., once unchallenged post-Soviet collapse, now faced a China whose military rise necessitated recalibration of its Pacific strategy, while Russia found in China a partner to offset American hegemony, albeit one increasingly dominant in their bilateral dynamic (Saeed and Yaqub 2023). Furthermore, Deng's export-led growth strategy, exemplified by special economic zones (SEZs) inspired by Japan and the Asian Tigers, drew massive foreign investment, integrating China into the global economy and culminating in its 2001 WTO accession (Tan 2021). This move not only locked China into U.S.-centric trade networks but also gave it leverage to reshape them, compelling the U.S. to accommodate a rising rival and Russia to pivot toward Beijing for economic relevance.

In the strategic triangle, Deng's reforms elevated China from a peripheral actor to a central contender. By leveraging U.S. economic openness while maintaining autonomy, China eroded American unipolarity, forcing Washington to contend with a peer competitor. Simultaneously, it outmaneuvered Russia, whose post-Soviet decline left it reliant on China's economic ascent for geopolitical clout. The result was a rebalanced triangle where China's growing power – economic, technological, and military – redefined global alignments, challenging the U.S. directly and pulling Russia into its orbit as a junior partner.

Deng Xiaoping's reforms have projected China into a central role within the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle, transforming it into the world's second-largest economy and a near-peer competitor to the United States. By 2024, China's GDP reached \$18.53 trillion – closing the gap with the U.S. at \$28.78 trillion – and surpassed it in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms at \$35.29 trillion (IMF 2024),

reclaiming a historical economic dominance unseen since the pre-industrial era when it accounted for over 30% of global GDP (Kissinger 2012). From 2.26% of global GDP in 1980 to 19.01% in 2024 (IMF 2024), this ascent reflects a deliberate leveraging of U.S.-led globalization, positioning China as a top trading partner for most nations (Kastner and Pearson 2021). Within the triangle, this economic rise erodes U.S. unipolarity, compelling Washington to adopt containment strategies – evident in trade wars and alliances like Quad, and AUKUS – while Russia, economically outpaced, aligns with China to counter American dominance, albeit as a junior partner.

China's export prowess underscores its strategic repositioning. Manufactured goods now dominate its exports (95.49% in 2015, up from 85.56% in 1995), with high-tech products surging from \$342.57 billion in 2007 to \$942.31 billion in 2021, dwarfing U.S. (\$169.22 billion) and German (\$211.89 billion) figures (World Bank 2024). This shift from primary goods to advanced technology – spanning aerospace to biotechnology – marks China as the world's leading exporter (Auslin 2020), challenging U.S. technological supremacy and reducing Russia's relevance as a high-tech player. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) amplifies this leverage, weaving economic dependencies across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Wolf 2020). Logically, BRI serves as a realist power play: by binding nations to its economic orbit, China constrains U.S. influence in contested regions like the Indo-Pacific, while offering Russia a lifeline against Western isolation – though Beijing dictates the terms.

Militarily, China's \$296.43 billion defense budget in 2023 (SIPRI 2024) has modernized the People's Liberation Army (PLA), enhancing its naval and nuclear capabilities (Yaqub, Ali, et al. 2024). This buildup shifts the triangle's balance: the U.S., once unrivaled, now faces a China whose war-fighting capacity could impose unbearable costs in a potential conflict (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024), necessitating deterrence over dominance. Russia, meanwhile, benefits from China's rise as a counterweight to NATO, yet its reliance on Chinese economic and technological support deepens an asymmetrical partnership. The U.S. response – strengthening QUAD and AUKUS – reflects a strategic pivot from exploiting Sino-Russian tensions, as during the Cold War, to confronting a unified Sino-Russian front where China holds the upper hand (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024).

Additionally, The Belt and Road Initiative is an extensive network of infrastructure projects across continents, demonstrating China's capacity to integrate nations into its economic sphere, therefore augmenting its power and altering global trade dynamics (Xing 2018). This economic power, along with coercive measures such as rare earth export bans, establishes China as a dominating force, necessitating adjustments in strategies from both Russia and the U.S. Moreover, China's rapid naval expansion and the fortification of manmade islands in the South China Sea establish dominance over vital maritime corridors, contesting U.S. military preeminence and indicating its ambition to govern the Indo-Pacific region (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024). These territorial claims not only enhance China's strategic depth but also affect Russia's assessments, providing Moscow with a partner to mitigate American influence.

Furthermore, China's technological ambition in AI, 5G, and quantum computing

enhances its worldwide prominence (Ding 2018), leading to U.S. restrictions and fostering collaborative initiatives with Russia, such as cooperative energy projects. The Sino-Russian alliance, although pragmatic, bolsters China's standing within the triangular dynamic, since projects such as the Power of Siberia pipeline and collaborative military drills establish a counterbalancing coalition against the United States. This alignment influences the U.S.-Russia relationship, compelling Washington to address a more unified opposition while offering Russia economic and strategic assistance to further its revisionism. In addition, China's soft power initiatives, exemplified by Confucius Institutes and cultural diplomacy, enhance its influence, fostering reliance among smaller nations and contesting U.S. ideological supremacy (Xing 2018).

In Short, China's technological and regional ascendancy further tilts the triangle. Its high-tech export dominance signals a catch-up with U.S. innovation, while BRI extends its influence into Russia's traditional spheres (e.g. Central Asia) and U.S.-aligned regions (e.g. the Arctic). This expansion forces the U.S. to bolster alliances to retain its foothold, while Russia, unable to match China's economic clout, leans on Beijing to resist American encirclement. The equilibrium has shifted: China's rise as a near-peer competitor limits U.S. strategic flexibility, replacing Cold War-era triangulation with a more confrontational dynamic where Beijing's economic and military might increasingly dictate the terms of engagement.

#### **4. The Russian resurgence: navigating the strategic triangle**

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 ended the Cold War's bipolar structure, leaving Russia diminished across political, economic, military, and technological domains (Kotkin 2016). President George H.W. Bush proclaimed victory in 1992, asserting, "The Cold War didn't 'end,' it was won", signaling America's intent to dominate the post-Soviet order (Lukyanov 2016). For Russia, this was a catastrophic unraveling – losing over two million square miles, Eastern European satellites to NATO, and influence over former Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia (Kotkin 2016). Vladimir Putin later labeled it a "major geopolitical disaster" (Davidzon 2022), reflecting Moscow's refusal to accept relegation to regional status. Within the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle, this decline initially sidelined Russia, ceding global primacy to the U.S. while China remained a latent economic force. Yet, Russia's territorial losses – compounded by NATO's eastward expansion (Yaqub and Ali 2024) – set the stage for a resurgence driven by a need to counter U.S. encirclement and leverage China's rise.

Russia's rejection of regional-power status reflects a strategic calculus rooted in the triangle's dynamics. The U.S. viewed the Soviet collapse as a mandate to expand Western influence, spearheading NATO and EU enlargement – incorporating Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and others by 2007 (Sciocluna and Auer 2023) – positioning both alliances on Russia's borders. George F. Kennan called NATO's expansion 'the most fateful error' of U.S. post-Cold War policy (Lane 1997), a move that

reignited Russian insecurity given its lack of natural borders beyond the Arctic and Pacific (Kaplan 2013). The U.S.-led advance diminished Russia's buffer zones, prompting a defensive expansionism – evident in Crimea's annexation and influence over Abkhazia and South Ossetia – to thwart Western dominance. In the triangle, this pits Russia against the U.S. in a revived rivalry, while China, quietly and peacefully rising, benefits from the distraction, exploiting U.S.-Russia tensions to expand its own influence without direct confrontation.

Russia's resurgence hinges on navigating this triangular interplay. Unable to match U.S. military reach or China's economic clout, Moscow leverages its geographic position and historical paranoia to assert relevance. NATO's proximity – potentially including Ukraine – threatens Russia's core security interests, pushing it toward aggressive posturing (Marten 2020). Yet, this also aligns Russia with China, whose economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative offer Moscow a counterweight to Western sanctions and isolation (Yaqub 2024). In the Pacific, an emerging contested zone, Russia finds common cause with China against U.S. naval dominance, though Beijing's growing power casts Russia as a junior partner. The triangle's equilibrium shifts as Russia resists U.S. hegemony, not to reclaim superpower status, but to carve a spoiler role – disrupting American designs while deepening ties with China to offset its own decline.

#### *4.1. Putin's Russia: revisionism in the strategic triangle*

Russia's pursuit of a multipolar world, articulated by Boris Yeltsin in 1997 and amplified under Vladimir Putin since 2000, reflects a rejection of U.S.-led post-Cold War unipolar world order (Donaldson and Nadkarni 2023). Initially, Putin explored cooperation with the U.S., notably post-9/11 by facilitating access to Central Asian bases (O'loughlin et al. 2004), signaling a potential alignment against shared threats. Yet, this détente collapsed with the 2003 Iraq War – where Russia joined France and Germany in opposition – and the 'color revolutions' in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), which Putin interpreted as U.S.-orchestrated regime changes targeting Russia's sphere (Lucas 2014). Within the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle, this pivot marked Russia's shift to revisionism, challenging American hegemony directly while seeking China as a counterweight. This dynamic is reminiscent of Cold War triangularity, when the USSR was thwarted by U.S.-China rapprochement. However, Russia now turns to China to challenge U.S. dominance, indicating a lesson: alignments change with power vacuums rather than ideological affinity, complicating regional stability in the Middle East, where Russia supports anti-Western regimes, and Europe, where Russia threatens NATO. Putin's 2007 Munich speech crystallized this stance, decrying U.S. unilateralism (Putin 2007), setting the stage for a confrontational resurgence that leverages Russia's military might – second globally – to disrupt Western unity and bolster its great-power status (Herd 2022).

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War epitomized this strategy. Triggered by NATO's pledge to integrate Georgia and Ukraine (Donaldson and Nadkarni 2023), Russia's offensive – backing South Ossetia and Abkhazia – halted NATO's eastward march,

asserting control over the strategically vital South Caucasus (Charalambides 2022). This was less about territorial gain than signaling to the U.S. that Russia would veto encroachments on its near abroad, a move that strained Obama's reset attempts (Legvold 2014). In the triangle, China remained a silent beneficiary, gaining economic inroads in Central Asia as U.S.-Russia tensions diverted attention. Russia's Middle East gambit in Syria further tilted the balance. Supporting Assad since 2011 with air forces and diplomatic cover (Maher and Pieper 2021), Russia thwarted U.S. regime-change ambitions tied to the Carter's Doctrine of petroleum and security imperatives (Woodward 2007). This bolstered Moscow's regional clout, aligning with China's interest in a multipolar order while exposing U.S. strategic overreach.

The Ukraine crisis – Crimea's annexation in 2014 and the 2022 conflicts – cemented Russia's revisionist arc. Ukraine's geopolitical pivot status makes it indispensable for Russia's Eurasian ambitions; without it, Moscow risks relegation to an Asian power (Brzezinski 2016). By securing Crimea, weakening Ukraine, and blocking its NATO path, Russia not only defied the U.S.-led West but also showcased asymmetric warfare capabilities – cyber, economic, and informational – matching conventional force (Pisciotta 2023). This strategy is best shown by Russia's control of natural gas pipelines to Europe, which turns energy into a tool of influence that puts pressure on the United States' European allies and increases Moscow's negotiating leverage inside the triangle (Katusa 2014). Russia's intention to alter the post-Soviet order is shown by its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its backing of rebels in Ukraine and finally the 2022 Ukrainian conflict; this action prompts U.S. retaliation and fits with China's desire to subvert American-led standards. The United States' commitment is put to the test and its strategic flexibility is enhanced by Russia's military deployments in Syria and proxy operations in Africa. These moves are part of a larger goal to regain great-power status via disruptive military and diplomatic strategies rather than economic parity with the US or China (Herd 2022).

Moreover, Russia's resurgence is further highlighted by its militarization of the Arctic and claims to the Northern Sea Route, which secure resource-rich areas and marine choke points that affect Chinese and American calculations (Herd 2022). This role is further complicated by its use of misinformation efforts, such as election meddling, which weaken Western unity and lead to American reactions that subtly help China by diverting American focus. In the triangle, this escalates U.S.-Russia rivalry to Cold War-like levels, forcing Washington to reinforce NATO and pivot resources from China's Pacific challenge. China, meanwhile, capitalizes on Russia's defiance, deepening economic ties (e.g., BRI) and quietly supporting Moscow's disruption of U.S. dominance, though Beijing's superior economic leverage ensures Russia's subordinate role.

Russia's revisionism reconfigures the strategic triangle. By halting NATO's expansion in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, and projecting power in Syria, Moscow reasserts itself as a spoiler against U.S. primacy (Idrees and Yaqub 2024). This aligns it with China's multipolar vision, yet Russia's reliance on Beijing – economically and technologically – limits its autonomy. The U.S., facing a dual challenge, shifts from triangulation to containment, unable to exploit Sino-Russian

differences as effectively as during the Cold War. Russia's resurgence thus reshapes the triangle into a tense equilibrium, where its military assertiveness compensates for economic weakness, amplifying China's rise while keeping the U.S. on the defensive.

### **5. The United States response in the strategic triangle**

Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 catalyzed a marked shift in U.S. policy, unraveling the relative stability in U.S.-China relations that had persisted from 1972 to 2008 (Khoo 2020). Initially bolstered by mutual interests – China's support for the U.S. 'war on terror' and shared Cold War animosity toward the Soviet Union. This equilibrium frayed under Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations as China's economic and military rise challenged U.S. primacy. Within the strategic triangle, the U.S. pivoted to containment, viewing China as a systemic rival (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024). Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' redeployed 60% of U.S. naval forces to the Asia-Pacific, fortifying bases in South Korea (73 bases, 28,500 personnel), Japan (120 bases, 53,713 personnel), and Guam (53 bases, 6,140 personnel) by 2024 (Reuters 2024), while tightening alliances to encircle China's maritime lifelines (Scappatura 2014). The Trump administration escalated this with a trade war, imposing tariffs on Chinese imports (OECD 2019), and the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) branded both China and Russia as threats to U.S. prosperity and security (Trump 2017). It indicates a U.S. strategy to curb China's economic leverage – key to its triangular dominance – while Russia's resurgence complicates the balancing act.

Furthermore, the Biden administration intensified this dual-front approach. The 2022 NSS declares that the post-Cold War era is over, and framing China as the sole competitor with the intent and capacity to reshape the liberal order through its economic, military, and technological might (Biden 2022). Sustaining Trump's trade war and Obama's Asia rebalance, the U.S. seeks to throttle China's rise, reinforcing its Pacific posture to deter Beijing's regional ambitions. In the triangle, this elevates U.S.-China rivalry to a defining axis, with Russia as a secondary yet volatile player. China's response – deepening ties with Russia via initiatives like the BRI – exploits U.S. focus on containment, forcing Washington to stretch resources across two theaters. The U.S. thus prioritizes China as the long-term threat, leveraging its economic and alliance advantages to maintain supremacy, while viewing Russia's military assertiveness as a more immediate but less enduring challenge (Biden 2022).

On the European front, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine sharpened U.S. strategy. The Biden administration frames Russia's actions as a direct assault on territorial integrity and NATO's cohesion – echoing Soviet-era aims to fracture the alliance (Biden 2022). Committing to make Russia's war a 'strategic failure,' the U.S. bolsters NATO and designates Europe as its 'foundational partner,' enhancing transatlantic security and urging allies to upscale military capabilities (Biden 2022). In the triangle, this counters Russia's revisionism, which seeks to disrupt U.S.-led liberal world order through Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria. Yet, Russia's alignment

with China complicates containment: Moscow's military distractions in Europe divert U.S. attention from Asia, indirectly aiding Beijing's strategic maneuvers. The U.S. response – fortifying NATO while sustaining Pacific alliances like AUKUS and QUAD – reflects a strained triangulation, unable to fully exploit Sino-Russian tensions as in the Cold War, instead facing a coalescing Sino-Russian front where China holds economic sway.

The U.S. thus navigates the triangle with a dual containment strategy: economically and militarily hemming in China while punishing Russia's territorial gambits. This shift from Cold War-era leverage to direct confrontation underscores China's primacy as the systemic rival, with Russia as a disruptive foil. The triangle's equilibrium tilts as U.S. resources strain to match China's rise and Russia's resurgence, revealing the limits of American hegemony in a multipolar competition.

### *5.1. The U.S. national security strategy in the strategic triangle*

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022 articulates a dual containment framework to outcompete Russia and constrain China, reflecting a strategic pivot within the China-U.S.-Russia triangle (Yaqub, Ali, and Kumar 2024). This approach hinges on three pillars, each recalibrating U.S. leverage against its rivals. First, the U.S. fortifies a coalition spanning democratic allies (e.g., NATO, G7, QUAD, AUKUS) and non-democratic partners supportive of a rules-based order (e.g., Philippines, Vietnam), alongside supranational bodies like the IMF and World Bank (Callinicos 2021). In the triangle, this isolates China's economic outreach – countering initiatives like the BRI – while encircling Russia's European ambitions, reinforcing U.S. dominance through collective influence. China's response, deepening ties with Russia, tests this coalition's cohesion, forcing the U.S. to balance resource allocation between Asia and Europe.

The second pillar targets economic rivalry, particularly with China, by reversing U.S. decline through a modern industrial strategy. Massive investments in infrastructure, STEM education, and critical sectors – biotech, semiconductors, sustainable energy – aim to reclaim technological edge (Biden 2022). Enhanced export controls, investment scrutiny, and counterintelligence measures thwart China's tech advances, escalating an 'economic war.' This undercuts China's triangular advantage – its economic primacy – while Russia, less competitive here, benefits indirectly as U.S. focus shifts from Moscow's military provocations. The U.S. thus prioritizes China as the systemic threat, wagering that economic containment will limit Beijing's ability to support Russia's resurgence.

The third pillar modernizes U.S. military and intelligence capabilities to deter both rivals (Biden 2022). Investments in cutting-edge technologies and a skilled defense workforce bolster deterrence, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region against China's naval rise and in Europe against Russia's territorial ambitions. A strategic retreat from Middle East entanglements – critiquing past 'military-centric' overreach – frees resources to counter China's rise, the NSS's foremost priority (Biden 2022). In the triangle, this shift pressures China's military modernization, forcing Beijing to divert resources from economic expansion, while Russia exploits the U.S.

pivot to assert influence in vacated regions like Syria. The U.S. maintains hegemony through military might, but its stretched focus reveals vulnerabilities as China and Russia align against it.

Successive administrations – Obama’s pivot, Trump’s erratic tariffs, and Biden’s structured containment – reflect an evolving U.S. stance in the triangle (Callinicos 2021). This escalation pits the U.S. against a Sino-Russian bloc where China’s economic power and Russia’s military revisionism challenge American primacy. Unable to replicate Cold War triangulation – exploiting Sino-Russian rifts – the U.S. opts for confrontation, driving global competition. In the past, the United States took advantage of Sino-Soviet split; now, its containment strengthens their alliance, a reversal that threatens fundamental order, as shown in NATO’s strain under Russian pressure and Asia’s disputed governance in the face of China’s rise. The lesson is obvious: when friends like QUAD and AUKUS falter, overreach leads to counter-alliances and undermines hegemonic rule. In order to avoid a clear Sino-Russian tilt, the United States works to maintain the triangle. However, as China’s power increases and Russia takes advantage of the weaknesses, this dual containment runs the danger of overreaching, putting American leadership’s ability to withstand this multipolar shift to the test. The triangle’s equilibrium tilts as U.S. policies fuel tensions, with China leveraging Russia’s disruptions and Russia relying on China’s economic weight, testing the limits of American resolve in a multipolar competition.

## **6. Conclusion: the strategic triangle and triadic interdependence**

The Strategic Triangle theory remains a vital framework for analyzing the contemporary dynamics among China, Russia, and the United States. It suggests that the conduct of great powers is influenced not just by bilateral relationships but by their interdependence within a triadic framework. In this regard, China’s ascent represents the most significant influence inside the Strategic Triangle, profoundly altering its equilibrium via a comprehensive strategy that integrates economic might, military advancement, and diplomatic engagement. In the Strategic Triangle, China’s ascent serves as a turning point, drawing Russia closer to challenge U.S. hegemony and necessitating a recalibration of U.S. policy, exemplifying the theory’s fundamental principle of triadic interdependence.

Russia’s resurgence makes it a swing state in the Strategic Triangle, taking advantage of the conflicts between the rise of China and American hegemony to reassert its power and influence on the global geopolitical chessboard. Its approach depends on using military might, energy resources, and geopolitical opportunism to create a gap between the two more powerful poles. Through energy agreements and cooperative drills, Russia strengthens its relationship with China, using China’s ascent to defy American pressure while maintaining its independence to further its own goals. As an example of how its revival is dependent on the other two poles, Russia’s activities inside the triangle react to China’s increasing influence – gaining economic support – and U.S. dominance – provoking containment. Even while

its economic constraints restrict its long-term leverage, Russia's swing position guarantees its importance by using the conflict between the United States and China to reclaim power and opportunistically adapting to shape the strategic triangle's dynamics.

Through a comprehensive plan of military, economic, and diplomatic actions, the U.S. reaction serves as the anchor of the Strategic Triangle, working to preserve its global standing against the rise of China and the Russian resurgence. China's regional aspirations have been hindered by military deployments in the Indo-Pacific, such as naval enhancements, the Quad, and the AUKUS, while Russia's territorial aggressiveness is addressed by reinforcements along NATO's eastern flank. In order to maintain its capacity to project force across both theaters, the United States must adjust to the changing dynamics brought about by Russia's provocations and China's maritime development. In response to China's technological rise and Russia's energy clout, trade limitations on China, like the CHIPS Act and tariffs, and sanctions on Russia after Ukraine are intended to erode their material underpinnings. This anchor is strengthened by alliance-building with NATO members, Japan, Australia and India, forming a coalition to oversee the Sino-Russian axis. Furthermore, by adjusting to the non-kinetic challenges of the triangle, the U.S. uses hybrid defenses and the development of a rules-based order to fight China's soft power and Russia's misinformation. Through the sale of LNG and shale, its energy independence directly weakens Russia's influence in Europe while also subtly aiding friends in opposing China's resource aspirations. China's dramatic rise, which prompted a 'Pivot to Asia', and Russia's resurgence, which necessitated containment, influence these reactions inside the triangle, illustrating the mutual conditioning at work.

According to the Strategic Triangle theory, the U.S. reaction seeks stability, Russia's resurgence seizes chances, and China's ascent spurs change – all of which are dependent on the actions of the others. While Russia's Arctic strategy and proxies cause U.S. responses that impact China's Indo-Pacific ambitions, China's BRI and military expansion trigger U.S. containment that makes room for Russia. The Sino-Russian alliance increases their power and compels the United States to reevaluate its policies in order to maintain the stability of the triangle. A comparison between the Cold War and contemporary triangles shows a move from exploitable divisions to strengthened alignments, suggesting that the U.S. dual containment strategy undermines rather than upholds regional and global orders, favoring multipolarity over hegemony as evidenced by the reorganization of European security and the fracturing of the Indo-Pacific. According to Kissinger's concept, there won't be a permanent equilibrium; Russia's comeback will maintain its pivotal position, China's rise might eclipse the U.S., and the United States could lose ground if it overstretches itself.

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