

Global Power Shift

S. Mahmud Ali

# The US-China-Russia Triangle

An Evolving Historiography

 Springer

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# Preface

In his second year as President, Joseph Biden confronted Russia and China in unanticipated ways in the ‘great-power competition’ bequeathed by Donald Trump. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, launching a ‘new Cold War’, reconfigured the triadic landscape.<sup>1</sup> Forcing US tactical focus from Beijing to Moscow, it questioned Washington’s strategic calculus.<sup>2</sup> Russia, raising deterrent alerts against perceived threats, affirmed a ‘challenge’ to the post-Soviet order.<sup>3</sup> Washington’s pleas to Beijing and Xi Jinping persuading Vladimir Putin to negotiate with Ukraine<sup>4</sup> indicated US recognition of the triangle’s *systemic* salience. After Russia concentrated ‘175,000 troops’ near Ukraine, Biden warned Putin of ‘severe’ economic consequences of any invasion.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously condemning China’s ‘egregious human rights abuses in Xinjiang,’ Washington led a ‘diplomatic boycott’ of the Beijing Winter Olympics.<sup>6</sup> US accusations against China included ‘aggression toward Taiwan’, ‘anti-democratic crack-down in Hong Kong’, ‘maritime claims in the South China Sea (SCS)’ and ‘secrecy surrounding the origins’ of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Until the invasion, Russia remained secondary.

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<sup>1</sup> Hauck G, A new Cold War, or the start of World War III? USA Today, 26 Feb 2022; Simpson J, Ukraine invasion: Is this a new Cold War? BBC, 25 Feb 2022; Troianovski A, In Ukraine Crisis, the Looming Threat of a New Cold War. NYT, 19 Feb 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Biden J, Remarks on Russia’s Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine. White House, Washington, 24 Feb 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Tass, Russia put nuclear forces on special alert after UK foreign secretary’s statement- Putin. Khimki, 5 Mar 2022; Campbell C, How Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Could Change the Global Order Forever. Time, 24 Feb 2022; Hill F, Russia’s assault on Ukraine and the International order. Brookings, 2 Feb 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Wong E, US Officials Repeatedly Urged China to Help Avert War in Ukraine. NYT, 25 Feb 2022; Xinhua, Chinese, Russian presidents hold phone conversations. PD, 26 Feb 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Senior Administration Officials, Background Press Call on President Biden’s Upcoming Call with President Putin of the Russian Federation. White House, Washington, 6 Dec 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Psaki J, Press Briefing. White House, Washington, 6 Dec 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Forgey Q, Ward A, National Security Daily. Politico, 6 Dec 2021.

When Putin dispatched ‘peacekeeping missions’ to Donetsk and Luhansk, triggering coordinated sanctions and rehashing triadic priorities, NSA Jake Sullivan considered Sino-Russian collaboration concerning but manageable within the febrile milieu.<sup>8</sup> SoS Antony Blinken, reversing policy-differentiation vis-a-vis the Sino-Russian dyad in soliciting Beijing’s support against Moscow,<sup>9</sup> learned counterparts Wang Yi and Sergey Lavrov shared geopolitical perspectives.<sup>10</sup> Russia’s Ukraine campaign left US grand-strategic precepts unchanged.<sup>11</sup> Days later, in his annual address, Biden recalled his warning to Xi, ‘it is never a good bet to bet against the American people.’<sup>12</sup> Almost immediately, a senior official proclaimed, ‘China is a much greater strategic threat than Russia is. My highest personal goal...has been to instil a sense of urgency about our efforts to modernize and to ensure that we improve our operational posture relative to our pacing challenge, China, China, China.’<sup>13</sup> Trends building for decades cemented this triadic reality.

Trump’s first election campaign accusing China of ‘raping’ the USA,<sup>14</sup> belied his later-claimed ‘friendship’ with Xi and Putin.<sup>15</sup> His identification of Beijing and Moscow as Washington’s near-peer-rivals, acknowledging *systemic* power shifts, reformulated the discourse. Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and proxy campaign in Donbas, and China’s island-reclamations in the SCS, challenging ‘the US-led international order’, had created ‘a fundamentally different situation of great-power competition with China and Russia’.<sup>16</sup> Washington leading democratic coalitions defending the ‘rules-based order’ from Sino-Russian revisionism proved more consequential than Trump’s other legacies. Policy narratives animating US and allied discourses reinforced allegations that the Communist Party of China (CPC) posed the gravest threats to US interests and the liberal order. Under Biden, fears of a Moscow-Beijing alliance deepened,<sup>17</sup> but insecurity frameworks remained China-focused. The invasion of Ukraine barely touched core beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan J, Press Briefing. White House, Washington, 11 Feb 2022.

<sup>9</sup> FMPRC, Wang Yi Speaks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Phone. Beijing, 22 Feb 2022; Wang Yi Speaks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Phone at Request. Beijing, 27 Jan 2022.

<sup>10</sup> FMPRC, Wang Yi Speaks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the Phone. Beijing, 24 Feb 2022.

<sup>11</sup> O’Rourke R, Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense- Issues for Congress. CRS, Washington, 1 Mar 2022, Summary, pp. 29–30.

<sup>12</sup> Biden J, Remarks: State of the Union Address. White House, Washington, 1 Mar 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Kendall F, Keynote at Air Force Association Warfare Symposium. DoD, Orlando, 3 Mar 2022.

<sup>14</sup> AP, Trump accuses China ‘Raping’ US. NYT, 2 May 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Kumar A, Trump can’t help himself when it comes to Putin. Politico, 28 June 2019; Pandey E, Trump: ‘Xi and I will always be friends’ despite trade issues. Axios, 8 Apr 2018.

<sup>16</sup> O’Rourke R, op cit., p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Bochkov D, China-Russia relations in 2022: an alliance by any other name? SCMP, 30 Dec 2021; Kempe F, China, Russia deepen cooperation in what could be Biden’s defining challenge as president. CNBC, 18 Apr 2021; Myers S, An Alliance of Autocracies? China Wants to Lead a New World Order. NYT, 29 Mar 2021; Hastings M, Foreign Policy Is a Sordid Business. Sorry. Bloomberg, 28 Mar 2021; Ridgwell H, China, Russia Top NATO Agenda as US Seeks to Rebuild Transatlantic Bonds. VoA, 25 Mar 2021.

Trump's foundational enunciation driving the December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) proclaimed: 'China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.'<sup>18</sup> Sino-Russian responses to US critique remained muted, although both robustly defended self-interests. Acknowledging intensifying US pressure tactics Beijing, claiming Washington's animus would 'boomerang', insisted on standing fast.<sup>19</sup> Moscow, criticizing 'extra-regional' powers for 'destabilizing activities', reinforced military deployments in the Russian Far East.<sup>20</sup> As Trump's presidency segued into Biden's, US targeting of China and Russia shaped security debates, while the dyad's responses deepened fears of a 'new Cold War' turning hot.

A bipartisan consensus, and one unifying most OECD member-states, coalesced counter-China tendencies. The premise driving these, and accreting an analytical corpus, was China's ability and willingness to challenge the US-led post-Cold War order, and with Russian support, existentially threaten liberal-democratic values, supplanting these with a statist Sino-Russian authoritarian model. With the so-called 'Dragon-slayer' school marginalizing its 'Panda-hugging' counterpart in US policy circles,<sup>21</sup> Sino-Russian preference for state-centric paradigms overriding individual rights, personality-centered governance trumping post-sovereignty liberalism, and suppression of divergences nurturing the freedom of imagination, association, and creativity, drew criticism. China-rooted insecurity, and fears of Beijing-Moscow collaboration, became the US-led coalition's *raison d'être*.<sup>22</sup>

Trump's China-focused 'trade war', 'technology war', military pressure and financial/investment threats ignored Russia. US rhetoric advanced this as the longstanding visage of triadic dynamics. When Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in January 2021, the Intelligence Community (IC) Analytic Ombudsman questioned US threat analyses: 'The United States is in a hyperpartisan state, unlike any in recent memory. The country is divided along political, ideological, and racial lines to the point where civil discourse has become difficult if not impossible. The polarized atmosphere has threatened to undermine the foundations of our Republic, penetrating even into the Intelligence Community.'<sup>23</sup> This severe self-critique and the 'Sino-Russian threat'

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<sup>18</sup> Trump D (2017) National Security Strategy of the USA. NSC, Washington, Dec 2017, pp. 2–3.

<sup>19</sup> Zhao M, Washington pressure tactics on Beijing are sure to boomerang. GT, Beijing, 11 Feb 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Marrow A, Russia announces troop build-up in Far East. Reuters, Moscow, 12 Sept 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Epstein G, Panda hugger vs. Dragon slayer. Forbes, 29 Jan 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Cheng E, China and Russia show solidarity, but likely won't support each other militarily, analysts say. CNBC, 17 Dec 2021; Kupchan C, The Right Way to Split China and Russia. Foreign Affairs, 4 Aug 2021; Gabuev A, As Russia and China Draw Closer, Europe Watches With Foreboding. Carnegie, Moscow, 19 Mar 2021; Bandow D, Why America Should Fear a Russia-China Alliance. Cato, Washington, 9 Sept 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Zulauf B, Independent review of possible instances of politicization of intelligence. ODNI, Washington, 6 Jan 2021, p. 1.

postulate's centrality in US policy processes warrant careful scrutiny of the validity of the 'threats' informing grand strategy.

## About This Book

The work asks, how have US-China-Russia triadic power relations evolved? What does the record show? Have China and Russia consistently challenged US-led alliances, or is this a recent development? Has Sino-Russian statist-authoritarianism existentially threatened the Western-led liberal order historically, or is this a passing, perceptual, phase? Do the actors exercise agency in choosing options? Does the record offer guidance or illuminate future prospects? The work examines such questions around a *problématique* central to 21st century inter-state relations demanding rigorous analyses.

History, denied finality by syllogistic limitations and power imbalances, is forever work-in-progress. Current events can obscure historical trends generating 'present' slices of the temporal continuum. Historians 'realize...they can never be completely "objective" in their accounts'.<sup>24</sup> Powerful elites inheriting presumptions, preferences and priorities from successful progenitors shape narratives around select postulates and evidence. Bequeathed values and interests determine how they define 'history'. Historical accounts present smoothly-logical and causally-consistent narratives, although the diversity of actors with myriad motivations, and their indeterminate interactions, render reality complex. History's non-linear temporal-spatial flow, roughened by intervening events revealed in granular examinations, is too variegated for comprehensive comprehension of multitudinous perspectives. As empirical-rational norms evolve within socio-cultural dynamics, and evidentiary resource bases expand, narratives develop. A single universal historical account may, therefore, lie beyond human cognitive competence.

Trump-era postulates on US-Russia-China triadic tensions, refined by Biden's team and accepted by US-allied states as 'the truth', were likely as political and ephemeral as their intellectual precursors. By appealing to powerful elites' perceived self-interest, these acquired the appearance of 'the reality'. Little made them any more or less 'real' than, for instance, prior beliefs in threats like the 'Yellow Peril', or 'Reds under the bed'.<sup>25</sup> Modern versions of the triadic construct crystallized during World War II, notably in 1941, when Germany's invasion of the USSR transformed the latter into a US ally and, months later, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor rendered China, already battered by protracted Japanese depredations, another member of the

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<sup>24</sup> Kuukkanen J (2015) Historiography between Objectivism and Subjectivism. In: Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 168–170; Crane S (2006) Historical Subjectivity. *Journal of Modern History*. No. 78, June 2006, p. 434.

<sup>25</sup> Rupert G (2019) *The Yellow Peril, Or, The Orient Vs. the Occident*. Alpha Editions, Maroussi; Komesaroff M (2018) *Reds Under the Bed*. Hybrid, Melbourne; Smith R (2005) *Reds Under the Bed: American Anti-communism in the 1950s*. History Teachers' Association of Victoria, Melbourne; Miller J (1901) *China, the Yellow Peril at War With the World*. Forgotten Books, London.

US-led ‘United Nations’ alliance. However, material presented here demonstrates that the US-China-Russia triangle originated in the actors’ fraught entanglements as Russia and America extended their control and influence across the evanescent Qing dynasty China, a process solidified in the Opium War’s aftermath.

The work is centered on a forensic study of US archival documents offering empirical evidence of how US perspectives on Sino-Russian relations, and their impact on US interests as assessed by policy-makers, evolved since mid-19th century, when US relations with imperial Russia and -China grew increasingly complex, reflecting changing US priorities vis-à-vis Sino-Russian intercourse which itself, too, was evolving. Analyses of shifting US perceptions of Russo-Chinese interactions affecting US interests lend depth to the literature on triangular dynamics.<sup>26</sup>

This is not, however, a comprehensive, three-dimensional, account of the evolution of US-Russian-Chinese relations equally reflecting the three perspectives. Nor does it describe the evolution of US-Chinese, US-Russian, or Sino-Russian bilateral ties, although it necessarily speaks to bilateral engagements impacting US perceptions of Sino-Russian relations. The book primarily examines how US policy-makers articulated evolving perceptions vis-à-vis China, Russia and Sino-Russian relations. The distinction is significant for a meaningful appreciation of a key definer of the 21st century strategic-geopolitical milieu.

## Methodology and Sources

The work examines perceptual trajectories of US official policy priorities vis-à-vis the two actors and Russian/Soviet-Chinese relations to the extent these affected US interests. The inclusion of Chap. 2, an examination of the Imperial era (1784–1911), is prompted by academic recognition that both Chinese and Russian, especially Chinese perspectives, have been profoundly informed by historical experiences, cultural traditions and philosophical constructs to a degree not widely appreciated among Western policy-communities.<sup>27</sup>

The cognitive-contextual landscape being such a significant definer of the contemporary scene, the work comprises qualitative analyses of primary material from archives housing US Executive Branch, i.e., the White House, Department of State (DoS), former-War Department, Navy Department, National Security Council

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<sup>26</sup> Blank S (2019) *Triangularism Old and New: China, Russia, and the United States*. Springer, Heidelberg; Ali S (2017) *US-Chinese Strategic Triangles: Examining Indo-Pacific Insecurity*. Springer, Heidelberg; Bolt P, Su C, Cross S (Editors) (2008) *The United States, Russia, and China: Confronting Global Terrorism and Security Challenges of the 21st Century*. Praeger, Westport; Vosskressenski A (Editor) (1996) *Russia-China-USA: Redefining the Triangle*. Nova Science, New York.

<sup>27</sup> Olikier O, Chivvis C, Crane K, Tkacheva O, Boston S (2015) Russian foreign policy in historical and current context. RAND, Santa Monica; Varrall M (2015) Chinese worldviews and China’s foreign policy. Lowy Institute, Sydney, Nov 2015; Kaufman A (2011) The ‘Century of Humiliation’ and China’s National Narratives: Testimony before the USCC. CNA, Washington, 10 Mar 2011.

(NSC), the IC, especially the CIA and the DIA, the Department of Defense (DoD), and Department of Justice (DoJ), documents. Congressional testimonies, remarks, statements and briefings delivered by US officials at think tanks, or published by media outlets, supplement documentation. Evidence from federally-funded research establishments, e.g., the RAND Corporation, Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA) reinforces the material.

## Spellings, Structure and Organization

The work uses Pinyin spellings for proper nouns but applies Wade-Giles spellings when directly quoting archival documents.<sup>28</sup> The text, for instance, spells the Chinese capital's name as Beijing but uses 'Peking', 'Peiping', and 'Pekin' when citing primary documents, as appropriate. The book is organized into seven chapters:

Chapter 1 "Introduction: A New Cold War? The US-China-Russia Strategic Triangle" summarizes the triadic dynamics which crystallized during Donald Trump's presidency but whose signs were evident since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea while mounting a proxy campaign in eastern Ukraine, and China embarked on an engineering enterprise designed to build islands with significant military potential in the Spratly chain of reefs and cays in the hotly contested SCS. These challenges to the presumed authority of the *systemic primate*, the United States, self-identified leader and defender of the post-Soviet *unipolar* order, triggered the coalescence of a US-led coalition striving to counteract and constrain China's growing geopolitical footprint, and pre-empt the parallel strengthening of a countervailing Sino-Russian partnership.

Chapter 2 "Triangular Dynamics in the Imperial Era" reviews interactions crystallizing among the United States, a young, vigorous and expansionist actor seeking control over its continental expanse and beyond; Czarist Russia, still expanding into lands traditionally held as Qing-China's vassal fringes; and China's ancient empire, set in its ways, having to cope with energetic 'barbarians' whose interference, impositions, intrusions, encroachment and occupation steadily eroded Qing authority. Sharing the Eurasian landmass with expansionist Russia, China faced decline's terrestrial consequences. The United States, following European mercantile forces profiting from the lucrative China trade bounty, secured vital waterways enabling Western coastal-and-inland commercial control, winning for itself a prominent seat at China's table. Around the turn of the century, turbulence in China and Russia, and wars involving the USA, Spain, Russia and Japan, corroded the former's coherence, empowered the USA, and transformed the triad.

Chapter 3 "The Triad Confronts Republican Turbulence" examines China's and Russia's post-dynastic transitions, roles played by major factions and their leaders,

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<sup>28</sup> Library of Congress Pinyin Conversion Project <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/pinyin/difference.html#:~:text=A%20%2D%20There%20are%20a%20number,you%20are%20looking%20at%20pinyin>. Accessed 9 Nov 2020.

and the influence of key external actors, especially Washington, in shaping the turbulent and fractious interregnum, and the *ancien régimes*' replacement with formally more modern but, in fact, equally authoritarian, successor-administrations. It reviews US neutrality during the first half of the Great War when the USA engaged with European belligerents in humanitarian diplomacy but ignored Chinese pleas for help; US charitable aid to famine-stricken Russia parallel to military intervention against Bolsheviks; anxiety over Chinese taxation juxtaposed to Japan's military occupation of Manchuria; and reformulated diplomacy toward China and Russia shaped more by Japanese and German action than by China and Russia themselves.

Chapter 4 "The Triangle in World War and Its Wake" reviews how US entry into the War transformed the triad. Growing economic/industrial integration made the USA 'the arsenal of democracy', assured its ascendancy and, with the war's asymmetric impact, secured US post-war pre-eminence. Roosevelt, *primus inter pares*, invited Chiang Kaishek to one of several summits with Stalin and Churchill, establishing China's stature within the 'United Nations'. To boost allied power, he encouraged Soviet cooperation with China and deployments against Japan. Urging both the KMT and CPC to fight Japan, he inspired another 'united front'. To boost US capacity to wage a global war, Washington nursed triadic engagements, sharing victory's spoils with Moscow and Beijing. US outrage over post-War Soviet support for European and Asian communist parties, absent countervailing pro-US ballasts, repainted the triangle in confrontational colors.

Chapter 5 "The Cold War's 'First Strategic Triangle'" recalls several triadic transformations between 1945 and the effective end of the Cold War in 1989. China itself experienced dramatic changes and its relationship with the USA and the USSR reflected these. The CPC's 1949 victory sufficiently threatened Washington for it to contemplate nuclear strikes in the 1950s. Sino-Soviet schism so outraged Moscow that it sought US support for pre-emptive nuclear strikes against China in the late-1960s. Sino-Soviet tensions and US power debilitation in Indochina encouraged Mao and Nixon, unbeknownst to each other, to seek collusion against mutually-perceived Soviet threats, a triadic configuration that lasted nearly two decades until *systemic* transitional fluidity transformed not just the triangle, but the *system* itself.

Chapter 6 "Systemic Transitional Fluidity and Displacement Angst" reveals how after the Soviet Union fragmented into 15 'republics', and Boris Yeltsin's Russia accepted US tutelage for a liberal-capitalist transition, Washington readied a blueprint for indefinite *systemic primacy*. Upheld with its insuperable military prowess, *unipolar* leadership granted the USA virtually planetary freedom of action which bred dissatisfaction and insecurity in Moscow and Beijing which, in turn, reinforced their defensive carapaces, and expanded Sino-Russian collaboration. In its dialectic response, the *primate* anxiously determined to neutralize any upstart rivals, considered Russia incapable of mounting any meaningful challenges but identified China as the 'greatest potential threat' to its global patrimony. Thus differentiated approaches broadly framed US post-Soviet grand strategy, but absent finesse, failed to preclude a coalescent Eurasian coalition.

Chapter 7 "Conclusion: Post-unipolar Triadic Turbulence" shows how, inheriting a troubled legacy, Joseph Biden faced challenges posed by a polarized home

base and a fluid post-*unipolar systemic* transition not amenable to persuasion by the powers of *primacy*. Confronting formidable globally-deployed ‘all-domains’ US capabilities, China and Russia collaboratively hardened their deterrent/defensive carapaces against strategic coercion. Boosting endeavors against China and a feared Sino-Russian dyad, Washington expanded alliance-building initiatives and coercive ‘presence-operations’. Refining Donald Trump’s focus on China and efforts to wean Russia from a fast-crystallizing Moscow-Beijing coalition, Biden faced a revanchist Russia instead. Russia’s reinvasion of Ukraine roiling the triad, effectively ended US *primacy*, deepening its ‘displacement anxiety’. US labors to restore authority, Sino-Russian resistance, and triangular grand-strategic angst drove dialectic dynamics portending protracted turbulence.

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: A New Cold War? The US-China-Russia Strategic Triangle</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Triadic Insecurity: Kinetic Perspectives	1
1.1.1	Rhetoric and Action	6
1.1.2	Grand-Strategic Triangulation	8
1.1.3	A Word from the Clandestine Services	10
1.2	An All-of-Government Endeavor	12
1.2.1	Charge of the ‘Dragon-Slayers’	13
1.2.2	Congress Steps up	16
1.3	Back Office Advice	19
1.3.1	RAND’s Geopolitical Analyses	20
1.3.2	RAND’s Kinetic Calculus	21
1.4	The Russo-Chinese Response	23
1.4.1	A Crystallizing Dyad	24
1.4.2	A Competitive Mindscape	27
1.4.3	The Kremlin Perspective	29
1.5	Dialectic Fluid Dynamics	31
<b>2</b>	<b>Triangular Dynamics in the Imperial Era</b>	<b>41</b>
2.1	Empires Engage	41
2.1.1	Benighted Beginnings	42
2.1.2	Bloody Insurrections and War	45
2.1.3	Flying the US Flag	47
2.2	Power Balances and Frontier Frictions	50
2.2.1	New Treaties and Conventions	50
2.2.2	US-Russian Convergence	52
2.2.3	An Oscillating Sino-US Trajectory	56
2.2.4	From Empathy to Understanding	59
2.3	Denouement of the Old, Ascent of the New	62
2.3.1	Empires Collide	62
2.3.2	Leviathan’s Rise	65

2.3.3	Russia in the New Century .....	68
2.4	Traumatic Transformation .....	70
2.4.1	Rebellion, Railways, and Narcotics .....	70
2.4.2	The Chrysalis Bursts .....	72
<b>3</b>	<b>The Triad Confronts Republican Turbulence .....</b>	<b>83</b>
3.1	An Empire Vanishes .....	83
3.1.1	Chaotic Fratricide .....	84
3.1.2	China and the Great War .....	85
3.2	China in a Geopolitical Chess-Tournament .....	87
3.2.1	US Neutrality Versus Russo-German Kinetics .....	88
3.2.2	Russia Transformed .....	91
3.3	Triadic Fluidity .....	94
3.3.1	A Forgotten Campaign .....	94
3.3.2	Meanwhile, in China .....	96
3.3.3	US-Soviet Malarkey .....	99
3.4	Sino-Soviet-Japan Linkages .....	100
3.4.1	China's Fragmented Polity .....	101
3.4.2	The Russia-China-Japan Triangle .....	103
3.5	New Diplomatic Deals .....	107
3.5.1	A Fresh Beginning .....	107
3.5.2	China-Policy Changes .....	111
3.5.3	Axis Attacks Rebuild the Triangle .....	115
<b>4</b>	<b>The Triangle in World War and Its Wake .....</b>	<b>131</b>
4.1	The Triad at War .....	131
4.1.1	Sympathy and Hardware .....	131
4.1.2	An Uneasy Alliance .....	134
4.1.3	Concatenated Tensions .....	136
4.2	Tripartite Coalescence .....	138
4.2.1	USA-KMT-CPC Triangulation .....	139
4.2.2	The KMT-USSR-CPC Triangle .....	141
4.3	Asymmetric Summity .....	144
4.3.1	Struggle for a Conclave .....	144
4.3.2	The Cairo Coven .....	146
4.3.3	Tehran Tete-a-Tetes .....	149
4.3.4	Washington, the Intermediary .....	153
4.4	From World War Toward Civil War .....	160
4.4.1	Non-intrusive Mediation .....	161
4.4.2	Triad Transformed, Again .....	163
4.4.3	Nuclear-Era Trepidations .....	169

<b>5</b>	<b>The Cold War's 'First Strategic Triangle'</b>	191
5.1	A New Sino-Soviet Era	191
5.1.1	The Communist Alliance, 'Containment' and War	192
5.1.2	Shifting Balances Amidst Fireworks	196
5.2	Triadic Near-Death Experiences	200
5.2.1	Nuclear Brinkmanship	201
5.2.2	A More 'Flesh-and-Blood' War	205
5.3	Triad Fractured	208
5.3.1	Eyes on China	210
5.3.2	Vietnam, War and Transitional Fluidity	213
5.4	The Nixon-Mao Dyadic Coup	216
5.4.1	Nuclear Histronics	217
5.4.2	Normalization's Triangular Drama	223
5.4.3	Afghanistan's Triadic Fallout	226
5.5	Gorbachev and the Triangle's Denouement	231
<b>6</b>	<b>Systemic Transitional Fluidity and Displacement Angst</b>	251
6.1	Post-Soviet Transitional Fluidity	251
6.1.1	The Primate's Bifocal Ascent	252
6.1.2	The Russo-Chinese 'Strategic Partnership'	255
6.1.3	Triad Revived	257
6.2	Linkages in the New Century	261
6.2.1	US Primacy and Rival-Responses	262
6.2.2	Triadic Dialectics	267
6.2.3	The Hegemon Reboots	271
6.3	A Battle of Perceptions	279
6.3.1	A Minor Misunderstanding?	280
6.3.2	Displacement Anxiety vs. 'containment-Light'	281
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion: Post-unipolar Triadic Turbulence</b>	291
7.1	Continuity Amidst Change	291
7.1.1	Dialogue De Sourds	292
7.1.2	Competition Management	295
7.1.3	Point of the Spearhead	302
7.1.4	Defense Diplomacy's Saving Grace	307
7.2	Preliminary Inferences	308
7.2.1	Imperial Restoration?	310
7.2.2	Hot-and-Cold Wars of the World	311
7.2.3	Singularity Versus Triangulation	313
	<b>Index</b>	331

# Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area-Denial
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
AEW	Airborne Early Warning
AFB	Air Force Base
AG	Attorney-General
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AmCon	American Consulate
AmConGen	American Consulate-General
AmEmb	American Embassy
AmLeg	American Legation
AMM	American Military Mission
AoR	Area of Responsibility
AP	Associated Press
APCSS	Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
APO	Army Post Office
ARA	American Relief Administration
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
AWC	Army War College
BASIC	Brazil, South Africa, India, China
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India, China
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BritEmb	British Embassy
BritLeg	British Legation
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
CBI	China-Burma-India Theater
CCP	Chinese Communist Party

CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CD	China Daily
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CGSC	Command and General Staff College
ChinEmb	Chinese Embassy
ChinLeg	Chinese Legation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIB	Central Intelligence Bulletin
CIG	Central Intelligence Group
CJCS	Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
CMC	Central Military Commission
CNA	Center for Naval Analyses
CNN	Cable News Network
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CoS	Chief/s of Staff
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPCCC	CPC Central Committee
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPUSA	Communist Party of the USA
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
CTBT	Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty
CTF	China Task Force
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DCIEC	DCI Environmental Center
DD	Deputy Director
DDCI	Deputy Director of Central Intelligence
DDI	Deputy Director for Intelligence
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DoC	Department of Commerce
DoD	Department of Defense
DoI	Directorate of Intelligence
DoJ	Departments of Justice
DoN	Department of the Navy
DoO	Directorate of Operations
DoS	Department of State
DoT	Department of the Treasury/Director of Training
DPB	Defense Policy Board
DPG	Defense Planning Guidance
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
DST	Directorate of Science & Technology
DSTI	Defense Science, Technology, and Industry/Institute
DTIC	Defense Technical Information Center
EAF	East Asia Forum

ECA	Economic Cooperation Administration
ECS	East China Sea
EDAC	Economic Defense Advisory Committee
EIC	Economic Intelligence Committee
EMP	Electromagnetic Pulse
ER	Economic Research
EU	European Union
FAS	Federation of American Scientists
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigations
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FMPRC	Foreign Ministry of the PRC
FOBS	Fractional Orbital Bombardment System
FoNOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
FT	Financial Times
GHDI	German History in Documents and Images
GLBM	Ground-launched Ballistic Missile
GLCM	Ground-launched Cruise Missile
GPR	Global Posture Review
GSG	Global Survey Group
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
IAB	Intelligence Advisory Board
IB	Intelligence Bureau
IC	Intelligence Community
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
ICDS	International Center for Defense and Security
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDA	Institute for Defense Analysis
IEA	International Energy Agency
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research
INSS	Institute of National Security Studies
ISB	Intelligence Support Branch
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
JapEmb	Japanese Embassy
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JEC	Joint Economic Committee
JPRS	Joint Publications Research Service
LoC	Library of Congress
Memcon	Memorandum of Conversation
MIRV	Multiple Independently-targetable Re-entry Vehicles
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MORS	Military Operations Research Society

MSDPRC	Military and Security Developments involving the PRC
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NBR	National Bureau of Asian Research
NCSC	National Counter-intelligence and Security Center
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NDU	National Defense University
NFAC	National Foreign Assessment Center
NIB	National Intelligence Bulletin
NIC	National Intelligence Council
NID	National Intelligence Daily
NIO	National Intelligence Officer
NMD	National Missile Defense
NPIC	National Photographic Interpretation Center
NPR	National Public Radio/Nuclear Posture Review
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
NPT	Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty
NSA	National Security Adviser/Agency
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NSDM	National Security Decision Memorandum
NSS	National Security Strategy
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NTI	Nuclear Threat Initiative
NWC	Naval War College
NYT	New York Times
OBOR	One-Belt One-Road
OCB	Operations Coordination Board
OCI	Office of Current Intelligence
ODNI	Office of the DNI
OEA	Office of East Asian Analysis
OGSR	Office of Geographic and Societal Research
ONA	Office of Net Assessments
ONE	Office of National Estimates
OPC	Office of Policy Coordination
OREA	Office of Russian and European Analysis
ORR	Office of Research and Reports
OSD	Office of the SoD
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
OTH	Office of the Historian
OTI	Office of Transnational Issues
PACAF	Pacific Air Force
PACOM	Pacific Command
PD	People's Daily

PDB	Presidential Daily Brief
PIC	President's Intelligence Checklist
PID	Photo Intelligence Division
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	PLA Air Force
PLAN	PLA Navy
POTUS	President of the United States
PoW	Prisoner of War
PPC	People's Political Council
PPS	Policy Planning Staff
PRC	People's Republic of China
PS	Project Syndicate
PSB	Psychological Strategy Board
PSD	Psychological Staff Division
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
R&AB	Research and Analysis Branch
R&D	Research and Development
RoC	Republic of China
RoK	Republic of Korea
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies
RussEmb	Russian Embassy
RussLeg	Russian Legation
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SASC	Senate Armed Services Committee
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCS	South China Sea
SEAC	South-East Asia Command
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SoD	Secretary of Defense
SoS	Secretary of State
SovEmb	Soviet Embassy
SPB	Strategic Plans Branch
SRG	Senior Review Group
SRP	Senior Review Panel
SSBN	Submersible Ship Ballistic Missile/Nuclear
SSI	Strategic Studies Institute
TBMD	Theater Ballistic Missile Defense
TCP/M	Trends in Communist Propaganda/Media
TMD	Theater Missile Defense
UN	United Nations
UNGA	UN General Assembly
UNRRA	UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
UNSC	UN Security Council
USA	United States of America
USAF	US Air Force

USCC	US-China Economic and Security Review Commission
USCG	US Coast Guard
USMC	US Marine Corps
USN	US Navy
USN&WR	US News & World Report
USNI	US Naval Institute
VoA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WP	Washington Post
WS	Weekly Summary
WSAG	Washington Special Action Group
WSJ	Wall Street Journal
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: A New Cold War? The US-China-Russia Strategic Triangle



### 1.1 Triadic Insecurity: Kinetic Perspectives

Five years before Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine 'changed history',<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump's presidency arguably changed the United States in equally unanticipated ways. Trump reflected and reinforced societal tendencies underway for decades,<sup>2</sup> but his grand-strategic formulation asserting a Sino-Russian dyad challenging US *primacy* must be thwarted by deterring China and weaning Russia off the Sinosphere, transformed geopolitics by raising triadic friction, including military confrontation, to unprecedentedly incendiary intensity.

In late-August 2020, US officials accused Russian forces in northeast Syria of injuring seven US troops riding a light-armored vehicle, in the first such incident in the post-Soviet era. Washington alleged a Russian vehicle sideswiped the US troop carrier while two Russian helicopters buzzed overhead, one only 70 feet from the US vehicle. Russian forces backed Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime while US forces sponsored rebel militias. No shots were fired, but the incident carried such escalators potential that the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, and the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Gen. Mark Milley, swapped telephonic accusations. The US side blamed the Russians for 'unsafe and unprofessional actions in breach of bilateral deconfliction procedures'; the latter charged, despite timely notification of Russian movement, 'in violation of existing agreements, the US troops attempted to block the Russian patrol.' Gerasimov noted, 'the Russian Military Police', in response, 'took the necessary measures to prevent an incident.'<sup>3</sup>

The USS *John S. McCain*, challenging Russian claims to Peter the Great Bay with a sortie in late November 2020, elicited challenges from the Russian destroyer *Admiral Vinogradov*. Again, the two sides issued conflicting statements.<sup>4</sup> Washington described military 'incidents' involving US, Russian and Chinese armed forces as exceeding 'the usual tit-for-tat testing of defenses and readiness', and posing 'the risk of escalation into open conflict'.<sup>5</sup> As US Pacific Fleet task groups drilled in the

intensely-contested SCS waters and sortied through the Taiwan Strait, China test-fired ‘carrier-killer’ missiles into proximate seas, a ‘massive Russian nuclear submarine’ suddenly surfaced off Alaska, and Russian fighter-jets ignited afterburners to edge within 100 feet of a US Air Force (USAF) B-52 Stratofortress nuclear-capable bomber.<sup>6</sup>

Washington’s decisions to sortie three B-1 nuclear-capable bombers over the East Siberian Sea, and hold frequent naval-air operations in China’s vicinity, triggered a ‘war of words’.<sup>7</sup> General Kenneth Wilsbach, Commander, US PACAF, noted the intensification of US, Chinese and Russian missions and ‘countering missions’ with ‘a little back and forth there’.<sup>8</sup> US allies, Japan and South Korea, too, received Sino-Russian attention. In late December, Chinese and Russian strategic bombers, escorted by fighters and AEW aircraft, drilled together for hours as Tokyo and Seoul scrambled fighters to monitor them.<sup>9</sup>

Military anxiety vis-à-vis China and Russia book-ended Trump’s presidency as the USN, USMC, and USCG, in their joint strategic goal-setting document, alleged, ‘China’s and Russia’s revisionist approaches in the maritime environment threaten US interests, undermine alliances and partnerships, and degrade the free and open international order.’ Sino-Russian ‘aggressive naval growth and modernization are eroding US military advantages. Optimism that China and Russia might become responsible leaders contributing to global security has given way to recognize that they are determined rivals.’ *Primacy* being a function of military domination, CNO, Admiral Michael Gilday, noted: ‘As sailors, we are on the leading edge of Great Power Competition each and every day. Sea control, power projection, and the capability to dominate the oceans must be our primary focus. Our forces must be ready today, and ready tomorrow, to defend our nation’s interests against potential adversaries at any time.’<sup>10</sup> As US forces pushed the boundaries of Russian and Chinese comfort in areas they considered security-critical, interactions heightened tensions, risking fearful reactions inflaming unpredictable escalation.

Potentially incendiary incidents followed Secretary of Defense (SoD) Mark Esper presiding over a US Strategic Command (Stratcom) ‘classified mini-exercise’ with Washington and Moscow exchanging hypothetical nuclear strikes.<sup>11</sup> The drill mirrored Trump Administration’s belief that China and Russia, especially China, threatened the USA’s hitherto unquestioned *systemic primacy*. Russia matched the USA in the size and sophistication of nuclear warheads, delivery systems, command and control and support facilities, metrics measuring China as marginal, but in US threat perceptions, Beijing preceded Moscow. The National Security Council’s (NSC) approach to China reflected this prioritization: ‘Guided by a return to principled realism, the United States is responding to the CCP’s direct challenge by acknowledging that we are in a strategic competition and protecting our interests appropriately. The principles of the United States’ approach to China are articulated both in the NSS (National Security Strategy) and our vision for the Indo-Pacific region—sovereignty, freedom, openness, rule of law, fairness, and reciprocity. US-China relations do not determine our Indo-Pacific strategy, but rather fall within that strategy and the overarching NSS.’

US objectives: ‘To respond to Beijing’s challenge, the Administration has adopted a competitive approach to the PRC, based on a clear-eyed assessment of the CCP’s intentions and actions, a reappraisal of the United States’ many strategic advantages and shortfalls, and a tolerance of greater bilateral friction. Our approach is not premised on determining a particular end state for China. Rather, our goal is to protect United States’ vital national interests, as articulated in the four pillars of the 2017 NSS. We aim to: (1) protect the American people, homeland, and way of life; (2) promote American prosperity; (3) preserve peace through strength; and (4) advance American influence.’<sup>12</sup> Just five weeks before leaving office, faced with the NDAA FY2021 bill bearing veto-proof majorities from both houses of Congress, a bill he rejected for reasons unrelated to China, Trump tweeted an explanatory threat:

**Donald J. Trump**

@realDonaldTrump

THE BIGGEST WINNER OF OUR NEW DEFENSE BILL IS CHINA! I WILL VETO!

11:49 pm 13 Dec 2020·Twitter for iPhone

While Trump underscored his Sinophobia to the bitter end, Beijing’s perspective diverged: ‘unilateralism is disrupting international order, bullying practices are challenging norms of international relations, and world peace, stability, international fairness and justice are faced with realistic threats and severe challenges. Solidarity and win–win cooperation instead of division and zero-sum confrontation, and a more just and reasonable international order is the shared aspiration of the vast majority of countries in the world including China and Russia, especially developing countries.’<sup>13</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed: ‘(the West) is trying to restore the unipolar model of world order. ‘Poles’ like Russia and China are unlikely to be subordinated to it. Rejecting the objective trends toward the formation of a multipolar world, the US-led West has launched a ‘game’. It has postponed Russia and China for later and is trying to draw all others into a unipolar world by any means possible.’ Russia would ‘promote a unifying agenda. The G20 is the only mechanism

outside the UN Security Council where it is still possible to come to terms based on a balance of interests.’<sup>14</sup>

A week before Joseph Biden’s electoral victory, Esper joined Secretary of State (SoS) Michael Pompeo in Delhi for their third ‘2 + 2’ meeting, a pillar of the US-Indian ‘Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership’,<sup>15</sup> with Indian colleagues. They signed a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement between DoD’s National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and India’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) on precision satellite-data exchanges, and a MoU for Technical Cooperation in Earth Observations and Earth Sciences for exchanges of terrestrial and maritime data and analyses. These and related agreements rounded out the US-India ‘foundational accord’ tacitly targeting China. Esper, prophesying further enhancing ‘our regional security cooperation, military-to-military interactions, and defense trade relationship’, hailed ‘dramatic improvements in bilateral military cooperation’, including ‘increasing bilateral defense cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, Southeast Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific.’

He thanked Delhi for expanding the originally bilateral ‘Malabar’ naval drills, which already involved Japan, to now include Australia, converting the exercises into China-targeted ‘Quad’ maneuvers.<sup>16</sup> Esper avoided publicly naming China; Pompeo did not. Assuring audiences that ‘the United States will stand with the people of India as they confront threats to their sovereignty and liberty’, Pompeo asserted, ‘the challenge of defeating the pandemic that came from Wuhan also fed into our robust discussions about the CCP. Our leaders and our citizens see with increasing clarity that the CCP is no friend to democracy, the rule of law, transparency, nor to freedom of navigation –the foundation of a free and open and prosperous Indo-Pacific.’ He praised India for boosting ‘our cooperation against all manners of threats and not just those posed by the CCP.’<sup>17</sup>

This was the latest in a series of remarks delivered by both ‘Principals’ at home and abroad. With the military spearhead foremost in the national security discourse, Esper underscored DoD’s Sino-Russian focus, especially on China, as the source of the most acutely perceived threats to US ‘global leadership’. US countermoves: ‘We are now in an era of great power competition, with our primary competitors being China and Russia. (Our) ten targeted goals include tasks from focusing the Department on China, updating our key war plans, and modernizing the force by investing in game-changing technologies...achieving a higher level of readiness, and implementing enhanced operational concepts such as Dynamic Force Employment.’<sup>18</sup>

Esper asserted, ‘Today, our strategic competitors, China and Russia, are attempting to erode our hard-earned gains as they undermine international rules and norms and use coercion against other nations for their own benefit. We continue to see this behavior globally, from Beijing’s predatory economics and its aggression in the South and East China Seas to Moscow’s violations of its international obligations and the sovereignty of its neighbors.’<sup>19</sup> Hours later, Esper told another national-security audience, ‘Our near-peer rivals—China and Russia—seek to erode our longstanding advantages through cutting-edge military innovation, such as precision long-range fire, anti-access/area-denial systems, and other asymmetric capabilities designed to counter our strengths. Moreover, in space, Moscow and Beijing have weaponized a

once peaceful domain through killer satellites, directed energy weapons, and more, in an effort to seize the ultimate high ground and chip away at our military edge.’ Sino-Russian advances, admittedly reactive, were unacceptable: ‘In the face of these threats, we must harness the next generation of technologies and stay ahead of the competition.’<sup>20</sup>

Addressing officers of the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), the ‘combatant command’ responsible for containing Chinese ‘revisionism’, Esper had asserted, ‘China seeks to undermine the free and open order itself, which impacts every nation supporting and benefiting from this system. China’s global ambitions include establishing a security presence at strategic access points, such as its base in Africa, to enhance its ability to project power globally and across all domains.’ Esper insisted, US globe-girding deployments in 750-odd bases<sup>21</sup> were beneficial, but China’s solitary armed presence was malign: ‘The PLA is not a military that serves its nation or a Constitution. Rather, it serves a political entity, the CCP, in its attempts to undermine rules and norms across the globe.’

Esper listed China’s failings: ‘Beijing has repeatedly fallen short of its promises to abide by international laws, rules or norms, despite continuing to reap the benefits of the international system and free markets, and second, to honor the commitments it made to the international community, including promises to safeguard the autonomy of Hong Kong and not to militarize features in the SCS.’ Determined to implement the China-focused January 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), Esper said, ‘One of the goals that drive our implementation of the NDS is to focus the department on China. To do this, we have stood up a new Defense Policy Office on China and established a China strategy management group to integrate our efforts. I also directed our National Defense University to refocus its curriculum by dedicating 50 percent of its course work to China and I tasked the military services to make the PRC the pacing threat in all of our schools, our programs, and our training.’<sup>22</sup> This fit into a pattern.

A month after launching the NDS, the NSC issued the ‘Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific’ addressing ‘national security challenges’: ‘How to maintain US strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence’. US ‘top interests’ included, ‘Maintain US primacy in the region while protecting American core values and liberties at home’. Assumptions driving the strategy: ‘Loss of US pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve US interests globally; Strategic competition between the US and China will persist, owing to the divergent nature and goals of our political and economic systems; China aims to dissolve US alliances and partnerships in the region. China will exploit vacuums and opportunities created by these diminished bonds; Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military influence will continue to increase in the near term and challenge the US ability to achieve its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region; A strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China.’<sup>23</sup>

### 1.1.1 *Rhetoric and Action*

Policy followed fear. Addressing London audiences, Esper enumerated his priorities: ‘most concerning to me, the PLA continues its aggressive behavior in the East and South China Seas...and militarizing occupied features in direct contravention of China’s commitments under international law.’ Esper highlighted China’s territorial differences with Vietnam, Malaysia, and Japan, its acquiescence in North Korea’s violations of UNSC resolutions, and its new national security legislation ‘that violates its commitment to the Hong Kong people to enjoy a high degree of autonomy.’ Notably, ‘the PLA’s large-scale exercise to simulate the seizure of the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Island is a destabilizing activity that significantly increases the risk of miscalculation.’ Belying *primacist* imperatives, Esper asserted, Washington ‘firmly believe no single nation can or should dominate the public commons and we will continue to work alongside our allies and partners’ in ensuring this.<sup>24</sup>

The contextual basis of Esper’s vision: ‘China and Russia are rapidly modernizing their militaries in an effort to erode our longstanding advantages and the balance of power in their favor...The CCP, in particular, intends to complete the modernization of its Armed Forces by 2035 and to field a world-class military by 2049. At that time, Beijing wants to achieve parity with the US Navy.’ To preclude this unacceptable development, Esper initiated the ‘Battle Force 2045’ study, concluding the USN needed a 355 + ship fleet by 2035, and a ‘balanced Navy of over 500 manned and unmanned ships’ including ‘70 to 80’ attack submarines, 140–240 ‘unmanned and optionally manned surface, and sub-surface vessels’, and 60–70 smaller combatants, by 2045.<sup>25</sup> Conceding that ‘achieving Battle Force 2045...will not be easy’, Esper reinforced the US military’s quest for sustaining *systemic primacy* through *transitional fluidity* by fielding insuperable lethal prowess.<sup>26</sup>

DoD’s Defense Space Strategy guiding the USAF Space Force and Space Command, aimed at restoring US dominance in this domain: ‘Space is vital to our Nation’s security, prosperity, and scientific achievement. Space-based capabilities are integral to modern life...Ensuring the availability of these capabilities is fundamental to establishing and maintaining military superiority across all domains and to advancing US and global security and economic prosperity.’ Circular conflation of US- and global security aside, the strategy aimed at securing the domain from space-faring competitors: ‘China and Russia present the greatest strategic threat due to their development, testing, and deployment of counter-space capabilities and their associated military doctrine for employment in conflict extending to space. China and Russia each have weaponized space as a means to reduce US and allied military effectiveness and challenge our freedom of operation in space.’<sup>27</sup>

China and Russia, even in self-defense, must not erode that freedom. DoD would ensure that over the next decade, ‘the space domain is secure, stable and accessible. The use of space by the US and our allies and partners is underpinned by sustained, comprehensive US military strength. The US is able to leverage our use of space to generate, project, and employ power across all domains throughout the spectrum of conflict.’<sup>28</sup> China and Russia, objects of US strategy, must presumably calmly accept

subordination. DoD restated perceived threats, challenges, and opportunities: 'China and Russia present the most immediate and serious threats to US space operations'. North Korean and Iranian challenges, too, were growing, but 'Chinese and Russian strategic intentions and capabilities present urgent and enduring threats to the ability of the Department to achieve its desired conditions in space.'

DoD leaders believed, 'China and Russia have analyzed US dependencies on space and have developed doctrine, organizations, and capabilities specifically designed to contest or deny US access to and operations in the domain.' Also, 'concurrently, their use of space is expanding significantly.' The duo considered 'space access and denial as critical components of their national and military strategies. Specifically, Chinese and Russian doctrines indicate that they view space as important to modern warfare and consider the use of counter-space capabilities as a means for reducing US, allied, and partner military effectiveness and for winning future wars.' Mirror-imaging, the DoD asserted, 'China and Russia have weaponized space as a way to deter and counter a possible US intervention during a regional military conflict.'<sup>29</sup> Triangular dynamics catalyzed by all three powers pursuing defensive goals triggered US objectives of neutralizing Chinese and Russian capabilities in this critical domain.

Just days before Biden succeeded Trump, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Michael Gilday advised the incoming Administration, 'China and Russia are undermining the free and open conditions at sea that have benefited so many for so long. Optimism that they might become responsible partners has given way to recognizing that they are determined rivals. Both nations are attempting to unfairly control access to valuable sea-based resources outside their home waters. Both intimidate their neighbors and enforce unlawful claims with the threat of force. Both have constructed sophisticated networks of sensors and long-range missiles to hold important waterways at risk.' Both were 'turning incremental gains into long-term advantages—such as militarizing contested features' in the SCS. Gilday warned, 'Failing to maintain our advantage at sea will leave America vulnerable. We have to move decisively—and do it now.'<sup>30</sup>

Sino-Russian progress in the strategic nuclear realm presented even more worrying challenges to US *primacy*. Adm. Charles Richard, Commander, US Stratcom, warned, 'China is on a trajectory to be a strategic peer to us by the end of the decade. So for the first time ever, the US is going to face two peer-capable nuclear competitors', Russia having been a peer rival with parity-based deterrent capabilities since the early 1970s. 'We have never faced that situation before.' Washington had lived with Moscow's assured second-strike capabilities for half a century, but now, 'strategic deterrence, which has always been foundational to the rest of the defense strategy, will be tested in ways that haven't been tested before.' China's prospective rise as a peer rival, and the possibility of a Sino-Russian front confronting US *primacy*, appeared terrifying.

Richard noted, Beijing aimed at deploying a strategic bomber force, the third element of its 'nuclear triad', boosting already operational land-based nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). Enhancing deterrence-efficacy, Beijing was also 'expanding all of its other capabilities, including new command and control systems and new warning systems, as well as conventional