Sino-Soviet Normalization and Its International Implications, 1945–1990

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PART III

THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

The strategic dimension of the Sino-Soviet relationship has always perforce included a third party: the United States. At first this was because this leading bourgeois democracy was perceived as their mutual ideological antithesis and chief security concern. Later, as the Sino-Soviet alliance deteriorated, the United States emerged as a potential alternative coalition partner, first for the Soviets, then for the Chinese. Other nations have also become involved in the calculus, beginning with Taiwan and Korea, later Vietnam and India and, indirectly, Japan, Southeast Asia, and even Afghanistan and Pakistan. But these other actors have usually been deemed peripheral and, to some extent, functional dependents of one or another of the three principals. In this sense, the "strategic" (or security) dimension of the Sino-Soviet relationship may properly be defined as "triangular." And, because the three countries involved in this relationship are large and powerful, and so geopolitically situated that their interactions necessarily impinge on the interests of many other countries in their mutual vicinity, this triangular relationship is also "strategic" in another sense: it is internationally pivotal. Whether anything more definite than this may be said about the "strategic triangle" can more easily be ascertained at the end of this inquiry than at the beginning.

The purpose of this section, then, is on the one hand to describe the strategic relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic, as it has evolved over the past four decades, and on the other hand to try to explain that relationship. In order to both describe and explain, a formal model will be presented below, and applied to historical "reality" in the subsequent chapters. This model is based on the assumption that the relationship among three actors may be reduced to a relatively limited number of possibilities—more than are possible in a bipolar arrangement, but fewer than, say, a pentagon might permit. The roles that each actor may play in a triangular relationship are similarly limited. Creation of a formal model permits us to explore the political implications of a limited set of conceivable
relationships that have been temporarily detached from the chaotic welter of international causal influences. Yet if the model has successfully grasped the logic of the relationship, its explanatory power will not be entirely vitiated by the greater complexity of empirical reality.  

The Model

There are two different types of “rules of the game”: the first are “rules of entry,” the second are “rules of play.” The first define which players may compete in the game; the second indicate which moves are possible, for what stakes, risking what penalties. Rules of entry may consist of either “objective” criteria (as defined by the analyst), or “subjective” criteria (as defined by the players). Objective criteria may refer either to some measure of material assets, or to the performance of some functional role in the international system. In terms of material assets, such as geographic or demographic resources, economic development, military strength, and so forth, it has (quite plausibly) been argued that China does not qualify for inclusion in the game. Only the Soviet Union and the United States can fully qualify as global strategic actors, and the structure of the international system is hence essentially bipolar. In terms of the fulfillment of functional role requirements, too, it has been argued that China cannot qualify. A global actor must by definition fill a “managerial” role in the international system, which means that it must have the power to affect the foreign policy calculations of all other members of that system. Again, only the United States and the Soviet Union have the international power-projective capability to play this role.

If material assets are to serve as entrance requirements, it is quite easy to demonstrate that China is less strategically significant than either the United States or the Soviet Union. In per capita terms, Chīnā may still be classified as a developing nation, with low levels of per capita output, income, scientific development, and a significant technological lag in various categories of weapons. It lacks the power-projective capability to influence strategic developments in far-flung corners of the globe; indeed, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is now estimated to be capable of conducting military operations beyond its own borders only with great difficulty. Yet China enjoys the status of a great power if aggregate indices are used: the country is first in the world in size of population; second in grain output and now in size of standing army (since the 1985 decision to retire one million troops); has the third largest navy and air force, and is third also in strategic nuclear
forces, space satellites, cotton, raw coal, and steel output; fourth in total commercial energy output; sixth in GNP, and in crude oil output.\textsuperscript{4} In view of recently improved chances for superpower disarmament, China's relative strategic position seems likely to improve.\textsuperscript{5} Population size has sometimes been discounted as a meaningful index of military strength in view of low per capita income, but it would still provide a useful reserve of cannon fodder in case of a protracted conventional conflict: if China were to deploy the same proportion of men in the 18–45 age group as does the United States, its standing army would rise to 8,470,000; any attempt to match the USSR's deployment ratio would bring that figure to 12,074,000.\textsuperscript{6} Moreover, that population is less vulnerable to nuclear attack than the more urbanized populations of economically developed countries, dispersed as it is throughout the countryside. China's lack of industrial development implies that its key industries could be quickly knocked out by a nuclear strike, but also the more primitive, small-scale rural economy might survive more tenaciously than the relatively capital-intensive economies of the developed countries. While it is true that China lacks carrier task forces and other such power-projective capabilities, the Soviet Union also lacked such capabilities until the mid-1970s. Yet both have been successful (up to a point) in promoting their ideologies and developmental models without military logistic backup.

Whereas it must be conceded that there is a wide gap between the strategic capabilities of China and the two superpowers, there is also a gap between the superpowers: Soviet technological development lags in many areas, and Soviet gross domestic product (GDP) is less than 60 percent that of the United States;\textsuperscript{7} even by a strictly military calculus, the USSR did not achieve strategic parity until the end of the 1960s. Despite this gap, China is clearly the third most powerful strategic actor in the world, with a significant lead over any contender (by the late 1970s, China had surpassed France and England, and now has a nuclear weapons inventory greater than that of both combined).\textsuperscript{8} Japan and Western Europe have more powerful economies, but less military-strategic heft than the PRC, for different reasons. Japan has a small, high-tech "self-defense force" consisting of an air-defense and antisubmarine network around its periphery. While Japanese military prowess should not be underestimated (the military budget claims only about 1 percent of Japan's GNP—about U.S. $30 billion in 1988—but that is 1 percent of the world's second largest GNP, giving Japan the eighth largest military force), Japan's lack of nuclear capability entails that it can figure in the strategic calculus only in alliance with the United
States. Western Europe is at this point still politically fragmented and loosely tied to one of the superpowers—just as Eastern Europe has historically been bound to the other India, a nonaligned state loosely associated with the Soviet bloc since 1971, is a power whose strategic interests are essentially regional.9 As the third most powerful strategic actor in the world, situated in the heart of Asia with borders adjoining more nations than any other country in the world, able to exert considerable influence in the region and sometimes well beyond it by dint of ideological proselytization and often skillful diplomatic efforts, with a permanent Security Council seat and high visibility in other international organizations and a fully developed position on most international issues, China’s influence has often transcended her military or economic limitations.10

In addition to these objective factors, there is the subjective criterion: do the three principals take one another to be engaged in a triangular game? If the players themselves act on this assumption, the triangle becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: “That which is perceived as real is real in its consequences,” as W. I. Thomas put it. Operationally, the subjective factor can be defined in terms of positive answers to four questions: (1) Do all three recognize the strategic salience of the three principals? (2) Does each player take into account the third player in managing its relationship with the second? (3) Would the “defection” of any player be perceived to shift the strategic balance between the other two? (4) Is each player always open to the prospect of a realignment of its relationship with the other two? (Thus the Soviet-American-European and Soviet-American-Japanese relationships are not subjectively “triangular,” although the defection of either Europe or Japan would shift the strategic balance fundamentally, because long-standing alliances and mutual expectations make such a shift incredible.)

As far as subjective criteria are concerned, there is no question that both the United States and the Soviet Union have perceived themselves as leading world powers since World War II, but the inclusion of the PRC is more recent. The Chinese have consistently denied that they are a “superpower” or ever intend to become one, but this seems to be because the Chinese term has pejorative moral connotations.11 Like the Soviets, the Chinese have denounced the metaphor of a “card” game, understandably in view of the fact that most such scenarios would relegate one or both powers to the role of passively manipulated pieces in another player’s game plan.12 Yet leading Chinese foreign policy figures have at various times indicated that they are familiar with the logic of the “game.” In a 1984 speech in Wuhan, high-level Chinese strategic
adviser Huan Xiang referred to "great triangular relations" as "what really determines the development of the world situation." In other comments, Chinese leaders—including Deng Xiaoping himself—have displayed keen appreciation of their country's strategic leverage within the triangle.

Not only do the Chinese understand the game, their actions indicate that they consider their country a fully accredited player, daring militarily to confront, even provoke each of the others from a position of apparent strategic inferiority. And the two superpowers, in turn, have at various times indicated that they take China's seemingly presumptuous self-estimate quite seriously. China is the only country in the world (aside from the superpowers themselves) to have been threatened by each of them in turn with nuclear attack. Each superpower has deemed it highly advantageous to be aligned with China, each in its turn experiencing euphoria, almost a national love affair during the early stages of entente; contrariwise, each has deemed China's realignment to be a traumatic event severely jeopardizing its international security (for the United States, China's "loss" helped touch off the spasm of national paranoia and internecine recrimination known as McCarthyism, which further exacerbated the cold war). When the United States began construction of an antiballistic missile (ABM) system in 1967, it was in order to defend against a Chinese, not a Soviet, nuclear strike (the Chinese were at the time deemed too irrational to respond predictably to deterrence). To the Soviet Union, the China threat is so serious that it has for the past two decades devoted an estimated 25 to 33 percent of its military budget to that contingency; about 52 of its 184 divisions are deployed along the Sino-Soviet (including the Outer Mongolian) border, and some 170 of its 378 SS-20 IRBMs were (at least until the 1987 INF agreement) in the Soviet Far East, most of them aimed at Chinese targets. Garrett and Glaser, by interviewing Soviet military elites and reviewing available war planning literature, found that Soviet strategic planners anticipated that a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers might be inconclusive, leaving the motherland devastated and thus acutely vulnerable to Chinese intervention with conventional forces in the postnuclear phase.

The analytical possibilities for rules of entry range along a continuum. At a maximum, the model might be pivotal to the international balance of power. At a minimum, the model might define the formal "rules of the game" for the three participants, without asserting necessary implications for the rest of the world, or indeed for any actors beyond the three principals. The modicum position adopted here is that
the model pertains to the power balance within the greater East Asian region (i.e., the Pacific Rim, or Pacific Basin), but not necessarily to other regions. The entrance rules are objective criteria, according to which these three qualify as the most powerful strategic actors in the region. Subjective considerations, though not criteria for inclusion, are important variables affecting the relations among members. Using the Kantian language Marx also found useful, we might distinguish between a triangle “in itself” and a triangle “for itself.” A triangle “in itself” persists as long as the objective criteria pertain; a triangle “for itself” becomes clearly visible during security crises, or when the configuration of the triangle is in flux. To repeat, this model defines the triangle on objective criteria within a regional context, and aims to provide a logically exhaustive—indeed, tautological—analysis of the possible relations among the three main strategic actors within that arena.

All the same, the ramifications of triangular permutations sometimes transcend the regional arena, for two reasons: (1) The Asian region includes the two global superpowers and two quasi or potential superpowers—China and Japan—and the implications of any shift in the power balance among them is obviously likely to have wide-ranging implications. (2) The international significance of the region in relation to other regions has increased considerably in the past four decades, largely because of very rapid economic development there.¹⁸ That economic growth—as well as the region’s commensurately growing political significance—is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.¹⁹ It seems legitimate to draw attention to the transregional implications of shifts in the Asian triangle when these appear obvious.

Before going into the “rules of play,” some of the game’s underlying assumptions should be made explicit. First, it is assumed, as in the previous section, that the same vocabulary of motives used to explain individual actions may also validly characterize those of collective actors (e.g., nation-states); that is, that Allison’s “rational actor” model still applies at the level of the international system.²⁰ This involves at least a “translation” from the language of individual motives or bureaucratic interests into the language of unit-actor policies. I would argue that this involves no real distortion, for the justificatory rationale for the latter—not to mention the decisions themselves—are explicitly tailored to “fit” the interests of the nation-state in question, whatever their parochial origins. Second, it is assumed that each player has a disposition toward the other two players which may be simply but not inaccurately characterized as either positive or negative. A positive disposition will tend to be reciprocated in kind, while a negative disposition will invite vari-
ous hostile countermoves: in international relations as in affairs of the heart, "unrequited love" (or hate) is unlikely to endure. That such a characterization often involves a "reduction" of complex and ambivalent relationships is no less true than the fact that regimes are often required to make such a determination, and to orient their own moves accordingly.

Based on these grounding assumptions, four different ideal-typical configurations are logically conceivable. These are the ménage à trois, consisting of positive relationships for all three players; the "romantic triangle," consisting of positive relationships between one "pivot" player and two "wings," but a negative relationship between the two wings; the "stable marriage," consisting of a positive "spousal" relationship but negative relationships between each "spouse" and a third "pariah"; and a "unit-veto" triangle, consisting of negative relationships between each player and the other two. These configurations are graphically depicted below:

While each of these configurations is logically possible, each is not equally probable empirically. The unit-veto triangle has occurred relatively infrequently empirically. When there is enmity between all three players, there is little to hold the triangle together or make it a meaningful basis for international strategic organization, and it threatens to disintegrate. The ménage à trois is relatively "introverted" and tends not to be "strategic," given the absence of negative relationships (unless it is simply a coalition of the three against some outside threat, in which case it is not really a triangle but at least a quadrangle). Despite difficulties of coordination due to the virtual foreclosure of vigorous leadership and the endemic suspicion of collusion, the ménage has been known to function reasonably effectively (vide the Trilateral Commis-
sion), and should not be altogether discounted. From a systemic perspective, it is the optimal configuration, though it is perhaps suboptimal from the perspective of the individual player. For practical purposes the two most commonly encountered configurations are the stable marriage and the romantic triangle. And the romantic triangle seems to be less stable than the marriage, in view of the instability of the pivot position. The main reason for variant stability has to do with the invidious distribution of structural advantages to different roles, which will now be considered.

Each role in each configuration has certain inherent advantages and disadvantages, although in any specific political situation these would be affected by the identity and respective strengths of the players, the nature of their interaction, and other empirical variables. Assuming that all players wish to maximize their national interests, each player will prefer at a maximum to have positive relationships with both other players, and minimally to have a positive relationship with at least one other player (i.e., to avoid negative relationships with both other players). Assuming all players wish to minimize possible risks, each player will try to prevent malign collusion between the other two players. Hence a rational player’s ranking of role preferences would be: (1) “pivot” in a romantic triangle; (2) “wing” in a ménage à trois; (3) “spouse” in a stable marriage; (4) “wing” in a romantic triangle; (5) “wing” in a unit-veto triangle; and (6) “pariah” in a stable marriage. The reason (1) is ranked higher than (2) is the difficulty of detecting and monitoring collusion, which is minimized if relations between the other two players are clearly negative. Similarly, the reason (5) is ranked higher than (6) is the absence of malign collusion in the case of the former.

Historical Permutations

Since the end of World War II, the relationship between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union has undergone seven permutations: (1) The period from 1945 to 1949 was one of an unstable and deteriorating ménage à trois, undergoing a transition to bipolarity. (2) The period from 1950 to 1959 was one of relatively stable “marriage” between the Soviet Union and the PRC, confronting the American pariah with an apparently monolithic “communist bloc.” (3) The 1960–70 period, although somewhat more difficult to classify, was essentially a unit-veto triangle. (4) The 1971–76 period was a “romantic triangle,” in which the United States played “pivot,” dividing its favors between
Soviet and Chinese "wings." (5) From 1977 to 1981, a brief and relatively unstable "marriage" was consummated between the PRC and the United States, casting the USSR in the role of "pariah." (6) From 1982 to 1985, there was a return to the "romantic triangle," in which the "pivot" role was assumed by the PRC, consigning the United States and the USSR to "wing" positions. (7) During the still emergent post-1986 period, there has been a reversion to the *ménage à trois* configuration with which the triangle began.

Each of these configurations deserves more detailed analysis within its historical context. It is worth investigating specifically which strategic considerations were uppermost in the formation of each, and what disfunctions were then responsible for the dissolution of that configuration and its transformation into a new one.