

THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis

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THE notion of a "strategic triangle" has been widely used in recent discussions of the relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, particularly since the Sino-American rapprochement began in the early 1970s.¹ Yet it is generally used in a loose, offhand way, as if its meaning were self-evident. The purpose of this paper is to posit a more explicit definition of the concept, to explore its inner logic and dynamic propensities, and finally to apply this conceptual framework to the evolving pattern of relationships within the triangle over the past three decades in order to see whether it can help illuminate past developments and make future prospects somewhat more comprehensible. If we succeed in bringing clarity to this pattern of relationships, it may be worthwhile to apply the same mode of analysis to other triangular situations (or even to more complex arrangements); eventually, we may accumulate convincing empirical generalizations.

A "strategic triangle" may be understood as a sort of transactional game among three players. Of course, as Wittgenstein noted, there is a great variety of games: some are essentially cooperative, such as "catch"; some are hierarchical, such as "Mother, may I?"; some competitive, such as football and poker; and some based on a logic of ostracism and redemption, such as touch-tag or hide-and-seek. The following reconstruction does not incorporate the sort of formal game theory used so effectively by Thomas Schelling or Anatol Rapoport; it is an exploratory venture designed to generate hypotheses and perhaps to stimulate more systematic strategic thinking.

* I wish to thank Avery Goldstein for his criticisms of an earlier draft of this article.

¹ Among the best of these are Michel Tatu, *The Great Power Triangle: Washington-Moscow-Peking* (Paris: Atlantic Institute, 1970); Thomas M. Gottlieb, *Chinese Foreign Policy Factionalism and the Origins of the Strategic Triangle* (Santa Monica: RAND R-1902-NA, November 1977); Roger Glenn Brown, "Chinese Politics and American Policy: A New Look at the Triangle," *Foreign Policy*, No. 23 (Summer 1976), 3-24; Michael Pillsbury, "U.S.-Chinese Military Ties?" *Foreign Policy*, No. 20 (Autumn 1975), and "Future Sino-American Security Ties: The View from Tokyo, Moscow and Peking," *International Security*, 1 (Spring 1977), 142; John W. Garver, "China's Rapprochement with the United States, 1969-1971," unpub. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979); and Banning Garrett, "China Policy and the Strategic Triangle," in Kenneth A. Oye, Donald Rothchild, and Robert Lieber, eds., *Eagle Entangled: U.S. Foreign Policy in a Complex World* (London and New York: Longman, 1979), 228-64.

Any international game is highly complex but not highly formalized; indeed, the players may not even be conscious that they are playing a game, and may choose to adhere to or disregard its rules (such as they are) almost at will. Yet, for as long as they remain *in the situation described by the game*, their foreign policy options will to some degree be circumscribed by its constraints and opportunities.

RULES OF THE GAME

Before taking a closer look at the strategic triangle in particular, it may prove useful, as a way of making my premises clear, to pose the more general question: Why do states fall into patterned relationships with one another in the first place, and of what do such relationships consist? My (hardly novel) answer to this question is that states (representing their constituent members, of course)² experience needs that cannot be adequately satisfied at the domestic level, leading them to enter into contact with those countries that dispose of the pertinent values. These contacts normally consist of transactions, or *exchanges*.³ Thus, there may be exchanges of goods and services, as in international trade; exchanges of population, as in migration; or exchanges of information, as in mail flows, propaganda, or espionage. These exchanges may be legally regulated through treaties, tariffs, censorship, and other forms of legislation. It seems analytically convenient to adopt a general distinction between exchanges of *benefits* (for example, trade) and exchanges of *sanctions* (for example, warfare). *Exchanges are in the normal course of things reciprocal* (a benefit elicits a benefit, a sanction elicits a sanction), but *they may or may not be symmetrical*. Thus, we may speak of positive or negative, symmetrical or asymmetrical exchanges, as depicted in Figure 1:

² I am taking what Graham Allison would call a "rational actor" approach, ignoring all but international payoffs. A country's foreign (or domestic) policy may be analyzed in terms of its constituent pressure groups, bureaucratic interests, resource constraints, and other internal determinants, just as an individual decision maker may be psychoanalyzed in terms of constituent drives and complexes. But the focus of this analysis is on *the inherent logic of specific patterns of relationships among nation-states*; the reasons motivating a particular nation-state to adhere to (or deviate from) any particular pattern is irrelevant to the validity of that logic.

³ The classic studies of exchange theory are: George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), and Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: Wiley, 1964). For an application to politics, see Warren F. Ilchman and Norman T. Uphoff, *The Political Economy of Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). I am not aware of any explicit attempts to apply the theory to international relations, though it would seem particularly suitable to that context in view of the relative lack of institutionalization.

		Balance	
		symmetrical	asymmetrical
Value	positive	1	3
	negative	2	4

FIGURE I

Type 1 would involve a mutually beneficial exchange of equal values, as in balanced trade; type 2 might involve deterrence or military stalemate; type 3 would include economic dependency, population brain drain, and other such unequal trades; type 4 might involve blackmail or conquest.

Which of these four logically possible “pure” types of exchange relationship are most stable and durable? Assuming that all parties to the transaction have access to the same information, it will always be easier to sustain a symmetrical than an asymmetrical exchange, and it will normally be easier to sustain a positive than a negative exchange. Symmetrical exchanges have greater stability because they are balanced and do not arrive at an outcome that sorts out winners and losers; positive exchanges are more durable because they cater to the interests of both participants. A negative symmetrical exchange may be self-sustaining if it is passive (as in mutual nuclear deterrence), but otherwise it incurs unacceptable costs with inadequate benefits to sustain it. An asymmetrical positive exchange may be prolonged, but only if the chief beneficiary is capable of deluding or coercing the lesser beneficiary, who is otherwise apt to rebel against it. Negative asymmetrical exchanges are costly and of brief duration, normally resulting in the exacerbation of a symmetry between the strong and the weak.

Three variables may affect the type of exchange selected. First, the *value* (positive/negative) of an exchange is determined chiefly by the behavior of the two players in the bilateral relationship vis-à-vis one another. Second, the *symmetry* of a relationship is strongly influenced by the power ratio (strong/weak) between the two players. Third, both value and symmetry of any bilateral relationship are marginally affected by each player’s relationship with the third player.

Ceteris paribus, any player will prefer a positively valued relationship (hereafter abbreviated “amity”) with other players to a negative one (“enmity”). The reason is that exchanges tend to reciprocate in kind: an amity begets benefits—trade and information flows, national security, even an affirmative mirror-image—whereas an enmity incurs sanc-

tions—bombs, tariff barriers, and so forth. It would seem to follow that it is in each player's interest to behave ingratiatingly toward other players. The problem is that an *asymmetrical* amity provides more immediate benefits than a symmetrical one, and that a negative-positive relationship (wherein *A* imposes sanctions on *B*, *B* confers benefits on *A*) nets an even greater short-term payoff. Because of the paucity of strong norms in the international arena and the domestic source of most positive reinforcements for the actors, there is an ever-present temptation to cheat or double-cross—to reciprocate with less than equal value in positive exchanges, or to return evil for good. However, the fact that the three players in the triangle have nuclear second-strike capabilities reduces the appeal of a sudden and decisive double-cross (a Pearl Harbor); moreover, self-limiting efforts to “win” negative exchanges are apt to prove inconclusive (for example, the bombing of North Vietnam did not long forestall “liberation” of the South, and the Cuban missile crisis stimulated heavier Soviet investment in naval and strategic arms).⁴ Visible cheating may also be counterproductive, eliciting retaliation from the victim or at least a public outcry; even Hitler, announcing his unilateral invasion of Poland in September 1939, sought to convey the impression that Germany was responding to a Polish attack. Thus, *at the present stage of weapons development, symmetrical amity is normative among members of the triangle, and undetectable cheating the preferred form of deviation.* In the absence of international enforcement mechanisms, each player must constantly and scrupulously monitor all transactions—for, aside from the danger of cheaters, the perception of symmetry in such dealings is notoriously subjective, and the data are nearly always equivocal. If confronted by evidence of cheating, a player must either check such behavior or permit the relationship to deteriorate from a positive to a negative one; otherwise that player submits willy-nilly to a losing negative-positive exchange.

The power ratio between two players is the objective factor most likely to affect the *symmetry* of their relationship. This is not an “analytic” truth, nor is the relationship fully deterministic: there may be symmetrical relationships between players of unequal power, such as the ideal-typical patron-client relationship, in which each player accepts a different (but equally necessary) role in a shared division of labor. In a world of capital- and technology-intensive megaweapons, whose

⁴ For an analysis of the failure of limited coercion in the Vietnamese case, see Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

unit cost decreases with large-scale production, a great power is better equipped to provide a security blanket than a small one, for example; but the latter may compensate by deferring to the former's leadership in strategic policy making (*vide* Japan's postwar relationship with the United States, or the Cuban relationship with the Soviet Union). Thus a great power may acquire a number of clients by dint of its dominance in certain crucial power dimensions, creating a wheel-shaped cluster of bilateral relationships (as in NATO or the Warsaw Pact). The presumption is strong, however, that the great power will take advantage of its dominance to transform the relationship into an asymmetrical one. The smaller state, should it prefer not to suffer such relegation, may try to negotiate more favorable terms with another great power, or to play the two off against each other.

The relationship of each player in a bilateral relationship to a third player—the distinctively triangular variable in the equation—may affect either the value or the symmetry of the first relationship. If player *A* adds an amity with player *C* to an existing amity with player *B*, the power ratio of both *A* and *C* vis-à-vis *B* is improved, creating the preconditions for asymmetry. If the relationship between *A* and *B* is negative, it poses an actual threat; if it is positive, it poses a potential threat. Thus, both sides in a potentially negative relationship (particularly the weaker side, if it is an asymmetrical relationship) have an interest in securing the support of the third, or at least in preventing collusion between the other two. Collusion between the other two players would be acceptable only if one had amities with both and trusted each of them implicitly.

Three different systemic *patterns* of exchange relationships are conceivable: the “*ménage à trois*,” consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the “romantic triangle,” consisting of amity between one “pivot” player and two “wing” players, but enmity between each of the latter; and the “stable marriage,” consisting of amity between two of the players and enmity between each and the third.

If the desideratum lay in optimizing the interests of all players of the game, the most desirable pattern would be the *ménage à trois*. It would preserve balance and provide incentives to all three for continued cooperation at minimal cost. But from the point of view of the individual player, the *ménage à trois* is not maximally secure. Such insecurity is perhaps inherent in the bilateral conventions of international diplomacy: I may be able to ascertain the motives and goals of my immediate negotiating partner, but I can never be sure whether the relationship between second and third parties is in my interest—unless it is

visibly negative. Thus, from my perspective the most desirable arrangement is the “romantic triangle,” in which I have an amity with two other players and they have an enmity with each other. I am Queen Guinevere (or Isolde), and my favor is ardently pursued by both Arthur and Lancelot (or Marke and Tristan). I may choose to maintain this delicate balance quite cold-bloodedly, deriving maximum benefits from both suitors in their rivalry to outbid one another, or I may be genuinely torn between them and unable to make up my mind; whatever my motives, the relationship can be sustained only as long as I treat each suitor “fairly.” Although this arrangement maximizes the benefits of the player in the pivotal position, fictional precedents suggest that it has serious drawbacks from the viewpoint of both other players. Each of the “wing” players is placed in a position of considerable uncertainty: unable to form an amity with the rival wing player, and dependent exclusively on amity with the pivot, each may feel vulnerable to being excluded from a hostile bilateral coalition. This uncertainty, so favorable to the pivot player, is apt sooner or later to prove intolerably ambiguous to one of the competing “suitors”—at least that has been the case in the legendary precedents, where such a relationship normally leads to marriage to one of the suitors and exile or death to the other. Yet we should not reify our analogy, for the norm of monogamy need not apply to international relations.

The third and most elementary form of triangle is of least cumulative benefit to the three players and yet perhaps the most durable: it is the “stable marriage,” consisting of symmetrical amity between two players and enmity between these two and the third (which may or not be symmetrical). In such a triangular pattern it is clearly in the interest of the excluded player to form an amity with one (or both) of the others and thereby escape further ostracism. But it may not be easy to establish such links, inasmuch as both of the other players may have acquired a vested interest in the existing pattern, which is premised upon mutual hostility to the ostracized third party. If the positive relationship between the two alliance partners is asymmetrical, the third may be able to persuade the lesser beneficiary to defect, and thereby establish a new and more favorable balance.

ORIGINS OF THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE: 1949–1971

Although the participants need not be aware they are playing a game in order for us to conclude that a game is being played, two objective conditions must be met for a strategic triangle. First, *all participants*

must recognize the strategic salience of the three principals. Each player may concurrently engage in various side-games, but these must be subordinated to the central game with other members of the triangle. Second, although the three players need not be of equal strategic weight, each must be accepted by the other two as a legitimate autonomous player. Thus, the *relationship between any two participants will be influenced by each player's relationship to the third*. These two conditions were obviously not applicable to the entire period under review, so it may be of interest to see how they came to apply (and why they failed to apply previously). We will then be able to analyze the pattern of play once the game was joined in 1971.

During roughly the first decade of the P.R.C.'s existence, the pattern of interaction between China and the Soviet Union was that of "stable marriage": they were joined in a positive relationship by formal treaty as well as by ideological affinity, and both had enmities with the United States, as depicted in the following diagram:

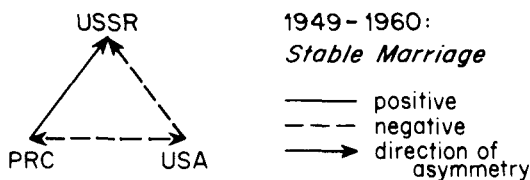


FIGURE 2

Indeed, so tight was the bloc alignment between the U.S.S.R. and the P.R.C. that Western politicians did not even recognize the latter's autonomy. Subsequently, students of this period found that the alliance was not as seamless as had previously been assumed, and that Chinese leaders had attempted to signal their interest in some form of independent contact with the United States; these early harbingers were dispelled by the invasion of South Korea in June 1950 and by the concurrent rise of McCarthyism in the U.S.⁵

Hence, the conditions for a strategic triangle did not, strictly speaking, apply at this stage. The autonomy of the three players was not recognized, nor was the existence of a triad of essential players. Rather, it was a period of tight bipolarity in which only two autonomous decision-making centers were acknowledged, each of which disposed of a

⁵ Two recent such "revisionist" interpretations of this period are James Reardon-Anderson, *Yenan and the Great Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), and Kenneth Chern, *Dilemma in China: America's Policy Debate, 1945* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1980).

cluster of bilateral positive relationships with weaker client states. The rigidity of the bipolar structure was enhanced by two factors: the novelty and awesome power of nuclear weapons, which the two bloc leaders monopolized at that time; and the motivational efficacy attributed to ideology. Each bloc became integrated around mutually antagonistic idea systems; the logical antithesis between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy was conceived to be so stark and compelling that all honorable alternatives were foreclosed. A certain amount of triangularity was introduced to the system with the advent of the nonaligned bloc in the mid-1950s. Yet, although the nonaligned countries were not part of the two nuclear deterrence systems and sought to formulate independent ideological positions, weakness made their claims to full autonomy somewhat unconvincing: they were of no more than regional military significance, and usually remained enmeshed in the "free world's" economic network.

Tight bipolarity tended to enhance the status and power of Moscow and Washington as bloc leaders: inter-bloc tension fostered intra-bloc allegiance and cohesion.⁶ To be sure, there were ample objective reasons for each bloc to fear the other. The Soviet Union had been devastated by the Germans and remained in a position of economic and strategic inferiority through the end of the decade, and the U.S. policy of containment lent some credence to a sense of national paranoia. The United States feared an expanding juggernaut akin to the Nazis; the U.S.S.R. was already irrevocably entrenched athwart the heartland of the Eurasian landmass and in a strong geopolitical position to dominate its rimland and to threaten Africa, Oceania, and ultimately the Americas. It was a logically orderly but rigid and volatile system. The Manichaean perspective each side had adopted tended to exacerbate local incidents by translating them into an ideological context that gave them global meaning, sometimes threatening nuclear confrontation. The "loss" of China was considered particularly perilous for the future of democracy, not only because of China's enormous size, population, and potential, but also because the Chinese soon proved to be more attractive exponents of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the Third World than their Soviet mentors. Their peasant-guerrilla form of revolution with its premium on mobilized nationalism, and their claim to having discovered a self-reliant, labor-intensive route to modernity that

⁶ Cf. Coral Bell, *The Diplomacy of Detente: The Kissinger Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 138.

preserved indigenous cultural values, made the Chinese model relevant to the problems faced by the developing countries.⁷

The following decade (1960–1969) was an ambiguous, transitional one, during which none of the three triangular patterns applied fully. The relationship between China and the United States remained negative, despite the first exploratory contacts between the two sides since Panmunjom. The relationship between China and the Soviet Union was transformed into an increasingly bitter enmity. At the same time, détente assuaged the negative relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States: each continued to consider the other the most likely adversary in a nuclear exchange, but an attempt was made to regulate the arms race and to cultivate various compensatory positive relationships (e.g., trade, cultural exchanges). It would be going too far to call this competitive-collusive relationship a stable marriage; at best it might be termed an “affair.”

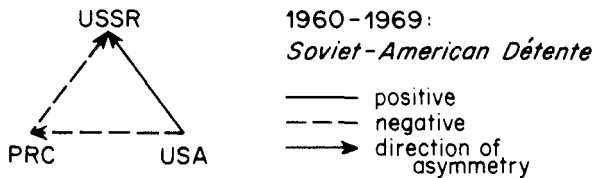


FIGURE 3

The two most decisive changes in the triangular pattern during this decade—Soviet-American détente and the Sino-Soviet dispute—were, I would argue, causally linked. The most important single factor contributing to the dispute was the disintegration of the rigid structure of bipolarity at the end of the 1950s, which was a precondition for the first phase of Soviet-American détente. China had been chafing at the asymmetry of the relationship with the U.S.S.R. for some time, but once the Soviet Union began basking in the spirit of Camp David, further sacrifices for the sake of the anti-imperialist alliance seemed unjustifiable. The P.R.C. had premised its future foreign policy objectives (including plans for nuclear armament and the recovery of Taiwan) on the assumption of continued confrontation between the two camps, and found no way to adapt them to this milder climate. The

⁷ For a clear exegesis of the Maoist developmental model in all its pristine cogency, see John G. Gurley, *China's Economy and the Maoist Strategy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

Chinese vulnerability to American nuclear blackmail was increased as well, for Soviet-American détente did not entail Sino-American détente, and may have even focused American anti-Communist impulses on the containment of China. In cases such as the Sino-Indian border dispute or the Taiwan Straits embroilment with the Seventh Fleet, the Soviets seem to have neglected to take Chinese interests into account—or else they dismissed them under the assumption that China had “nowhere to go” and would subordinate its national interest to the interests of international communism (as perceived by the Soviet Union). But China responded with an increasingly comprehensive critique of the Soviet system. Détente with capitalism necessitated a general diminution of the role of ideology, and resulted in specific doctrinal adjustments that exposed the Soviet Union to telling Chinese polemics against “revisionism,” “goulash communism,” and so forth.⁸

And yet, because the principal Chinese grievance against the U.S.S.R. had to do with the Soviet Union’s defection from its role responsibilities as bloc leader in an international ideological crusade, China was inhibited from taking the dispute outside the bloc—let alone forming any sort of coalition with non-Communist states, which would have undermined the Chinese ideological position entirely. The Sino-Soviet dispute thus remained within the family; it consisted mainly of attempts to mobilize the support of other bloc members to censure the apostate party and restore ideological consensus, based on the model of intra-Party rectification. Both China and the Soviet Union, as *de facto* competitors for bloc leadership, were thus driven to advocate more militantly “revolutionary” positions than they might otherwise have considered prudent. Domestically, both undertook sweeping organizational and programmatic innovations designed to bring their countries nearer to the Communist Utopia. (In China, these included the Hundred Flowers, the commune, and the Great Leap Forward; in the Soviet Union, the Third Party Program of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU with its accompanying Twenty-Year Plan, the movement from *kol-khozy* to *sovkhhozy*, and the proclaimed advent of a state and party of the “whole people.”) In foreign affairs, while the Soviet Union continued (in rather fitful and defensive fashion) to pursue détente with the United States, the Sino-Soviet dispute emerged in the form of an intensely competitive suit for the hearts of the newly emerging countries of the Third World, since both the U.S.S.R. and China evaluated their future international potential more highly than their current strategic

⁸ See Alfred D. Low, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute: An Analysis of the Polemics* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1976).

significance. In this competition, China tended to espouse the efficacy of national liberation by disestablished parties or movements, whereas the Soviet Union more easily accommodated itself to conventional alliances with governments, replete with trade, aid, advisors, and cultural exchanges.⁹ But, although the Soviet and Chinese Communist Parties vigorously denounced one another on all fronts, they remained ostensibly dedicated to the same doctrinal objectives and opposed to capitalism and imperialism; this underlying accord seemed to contain their dispute for a time. There is even some indication that the P.R.C. continued to rely on the Soviet nuclear umbrella.

Nor did the United States deem it in its interest during this period to take advantage of the widening cleavage between the two powers, though the possibility was raised from time to time.¹⁰ Exploratory negotiations were initiated on an unofficial level through the Polish embassy in Warsaw in 1955; roughly speaking, the Chinese seemed more forthcoming in these talks between 1955 and the launching of the Great Leap Forward (1958), the Americans more conciliatory in the ensuing years.¹¹ The Sino-Soviet connection was not really brought into these talks, though one of the assumptions behind them was undoubtedly that China might be brought to exercise at least as much flexibility in its foreign policy behavior as had the Soviet Union.¹² But the early 1960s happened to be a period when the Chinese were unduly sensitive to ideological deviation, not merely because they were challenging the CPSU for leadership of the international communist movement from a position very nearly bereft of all but ideological resources, but also because they had only recently suffered a serious setback in their efforts to realize ideological prophecies, and tended to compensate by overstating their own orthodoxy and shunning any prospect of reconciliation. For their part, American policy makers were put off by the radical phase in Chinese foreign policy in the early

⁹ Cf. Charles Neuhauser, *Third World Politics: China and the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization*, Harvard East Asia Monograph No. 27 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Alvin Rubinstein, ed., *Soviet and Chinese Influence in the Third World* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

¹⁰ Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Policy Towards Communist China, 1949-1969* (New York: Crowell, 1972); Warren Cohen, "American Perceptions of China," in Michael Oksenberg and Robert Oxnham, eds., *Dragon and Eagle: United States-China Relations, Past and Future* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 77-79.

¹¹ Kenneth T. Young, *Negotiating with the Chinese Communists: The United States Experience, 1953-1967* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968); see also Arthur Lall, *How Communist China Negotiates* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

¹² Young (fn. 11), 44-47, 58-59; see also Robert G. Sutter, *China-Watch: Toward Sino-American Reconciliation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 31-62.

1960s; moreover, Sino-Soviet “united action” in support of North Vietnam tended to corroborate the image of monolithic communism. China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964 presented the United States with the prospect of a two-front war (thus helping to mobilize support for the ABM), and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution produced fear of Chinese xenophobia and apparent irrationality.¹³ By the late 1960s, Chinese foreign policy seemed to have demonstrated its “autonomy”: it had simultaneously disaffected both of the world’s major powers without deriving any national benefit from it at all (aside from the allegiance of the Albanians and a handful of other far-left ideologues).

By the end of the decade, Chinese foreign policy had moved from an autonomy based on ideological principle to one based on national interest. Ironically, the primary stimulus for this secularization of Chinese policy was provided by the player who stood to benefit least: the Soviet Union. In moving aggressively in 1968 to prevent further Czech liberalization (of which the Chinese also disapproved), the Soviets demonstrated—in much more blatant fashion than had been the case either in Berlin in 1953 or in Poland and Hungary in 1956—their disdain for the concept of national sovereignty.¹⁴ Having endured a series of imperialist humiliations extending from the first Opium War in 1839 to the Japanese invasion of 1931–1945, China was deeply committed to national sovereignty—indeed, the Communist Revolution had succeeded principally by emphasizing this commitment.¹⁵ The Brezhnev doctrine, enunciated *post hoc* to justify the invasion, in effect asserted the Soviet Union’s right to alter or replace the regime of any other state socialist system at its discretion. The implications of this doctrine were underlined the following spring, when violent clashes erupted over disputed sections of the Sino-Soviet border. Fortification of this border had begun in 1965, at Soviet initiative, and it now accel-

¹³ See Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); also Morton Halperin, *China and the Bomb* (New York: Praeger, 1965).

¹⁴ Linda D. Dillon, Bruce Burton, and Walter C. Soderland, in “Who Was the Principal Enemy? Shifts in the Official Chinese Perceptions of the Superpowers, 1968–1969,” *Asian Survey*, xvii (May 1977), 456–74, detect a significant shift in Chinese perception of the superpowers between late 1968 and early 1969, illustrating the traumatic impact of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the Sino-Soviet border clashes of spring 1969. They conclude that fear of attack from the Soviet Union was the most important factor underlying a “new” post-Cultural Revolution foreign policy. For a qualification of these conclusions, however, see Garver (fn. 1).

¹⁵ The best-known advocate of this position is, of course, Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962).

erated apace: the Soviets increased their strength at the border from 13 "thin" divisions in 1965 to 25 "thick" divisions by the spring of 1969, and to more than 40 divisions by 1972; infantry troops were reinforced by tanks, artillery, and missiles.¹⁶ In the summer and fall of 1969, China mobilized its own border defenses, placed its economy on a war footing, launched a campaign to "store grain and dig tunnels deep," and evacuated unessential civilians from exposed northern cities.¹⁷

It was in this context that the Sino-Soviet conflict was transformed from an intra-bloc dispute to an international altercation.¹⁸ The Soviets began to float rumors to the effect that they were considering a preemptive strike against the P.R.C.'s nascent nuclear facilities, leading to speculation that they were tacitly proposing Soviet-American collusion.¹⁹ Moscow also established ties with Taiwan, improved relations with India and Japan, increased aid to North Vietnam, and (in June 1969) proposed an Asian collective security pact, evincing a desire to assume America's former role in the "containment" of the P.R.C. Beginning in late 1970, China launched a vigorous and ideologically promiscuous courtship of allies in the Third and Second Worlds, which facilitated its entry into the United Nations in the summer of 1971. Since the U.S.S.R. and the P.R.C. could now trade epithets before a global forum, the dispute was further internationalized. Internationalization had a secularizing effect, as both sides shifted from a debate over Marxist doctrine to a less specialized vocabulary (hegemony, imperialism, etc.) capable of mobilizing ideologically heterodox Third-World support.

¹⁶ Robert C. Horn, "The Soviet Union and Asian Security," in Sudershan Chawla and D. R. Sardesai, eds., *Changing Patterns of Security and Stability in Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 63-99.

¹⁷ See An Sung Tai, *The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).

¹⁸ Chalmers Johnson, "The Achievements of Chinese Foreign Policy," unpub. paper presented at the Third Joint Soviet-American Conference on Asia, Santa Barbara, Calif., December 10-15, 1979.

¹⁹ Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (New York: Dell, 1975), 259-60; Bell (fn. 6), 15-16. According to Bell,

The Soviet signals that they were contemplating a preventive war, perhaps including nuclear strikes, were so deliberate, clumsy and obvious that it is difficult not to believe that they were intended to be heard by the Chinese, who should be cowed into a more submissive attitude. They included, for instance, letters to Communist parties in the West that seemed to be asking for advance approval of a strike against China. . . . The Russians apparently offered, via the military attachés in Washington and Moscow, a clear hint if not an actual bid for American acquiescence in such a strike. They were snubbed by the U.S. policy makers concerned, and knowledge of the bid and the snub were conveyed to the Chinese government.

The strategic triangle thus came into being in response to China's attempts to break out of an impending Soviet encirclement and to launch its own counterencirclement of the U.S.S.R. The P.R.C. saw itself confronting an ambiguous liaison between the United States and the Soviet Union which, if it became more collusive, could be extremely dangerous; but it was judged still to be sufficiently competitive that a wedge could be driven between the two. Both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had enmities with China at that time, obviously entailing the need to transform one of them. Interestingly enough, China's first option may have been an attempt at rapprochement with the Soviet Union.²⁰ The Soviets seem not to have reciprocated with what the P.R.C. considered acceptable terms, however; they would certainly have been delighted to welcome the Chinese back into "stable marriage," but they seem to have envisaged essentially a return to the *status quo ante*, placing China in an asymmetrical position.²¹ The P.R.C. was thus open to consider an American offer. With the proclamation of the "Nixon Doctrine" (1969) and the initiation of phased withdrawal from Vietnam and Taiwan, the United States no longer posed an immediate threat to Chinese security. Kissinger and "the new Nixon" brought a cool and innovative spirit to the conduct of foreign affairs, attempting to isolate it from the passions of domestic politics and to analyze national interests essentially in terms of power rather than ideology. They were probably the first explicitly to adopt a "triangular" view of world strategy, according to which there were perhaps five major economic power centers, but only three powers of global strategic significance: the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Though unwilling to betray the Taiwan lobby completely, Washington devised a formula that placed the Taiwan question—which had so long inhibited any rapprochement between the two countries—in abeyance, thus facilitating the establishment of unofficial but extensive contacts between the two countries.²² The United States was very careful to emphasize that the budding Sino-American friendship was not directed against any "other" country, and even contended that it took no sides in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Thus a romantic triangle was born, with the United States at the pivot:

²⁰ Garver (fn. 1) offers evidence to this effect gleaned from content analysis of official statements and shifts in trade flows, as well as "Kremlinological" inferences.

²¹ For a perceptive analysis of post-Cultural Revolution Sino-Soviet relations, see Kenneth Lieberthal, *Sino-Soviet Conflict in the 1970s: Its Evolution and Implications for the Strategic Triangle* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Report, July 1978).

²² Tang Tsou, "Statesmanship and Scholarship," *World Politics*, xxvi (April 1974), 428-51.

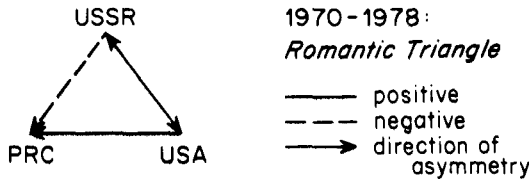


FIGURE 4

The logic of the new relationship was stated most explicitly by Kissinger: “Our relationships to possible opponents should be such . . . that our options toward both of them are always greater than their options toward each other.”²³ Thus the two positive sides of the triangle seemed to be premised on a negative relationship between the Soviet Union and the P.R.C.—but the United States was nevertheless cautious not to aggravate that relationship: “Triangular diplomacy must avoid the impression that it is ‘using’ either of the contenders against the other; otherwise one becomes vulnerable to retaliation or blackmail. The hostility between China and the Soviet Union served our purposes best if we maintained closer relations with each side than they did with each other.”²⁴

China and the United States derived immediate political benefits from the triangle. China had previously not had an amity with either power, and it now did with at least one, which might be able to provide protection against the other. Indeed, although tension and occasional violence persisted along the Amur-Ussuri, once the United States declared its opposition to a pre-emptive strike and escalation of border hostilities, rumors of war began to evaporate. Though the Vietnamese conflict turned out to be far less dependent upon Chinese support than Washington had anticipated, the U.S. succeeded in perceptibly moderating Peking’s support for Hanoi (to the latter’s lasting chagrin); in fact, China changed its general posture toward the Third World, abandoning talk of people’s war and invoking détente and peaceful coexistence.²⁵ The Soviet Union, like the jilted wife who still hopes to save her marriage, redoubled efforts “to demonstrate that the U.S.-Soviet relationship was more important than the U.S.-China relationship,” with the result that “the tone in all our dealings changed

²³ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 165.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 712.

²⁵ Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and China’s Foreign Relations: Peking’s Support for Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Low (fn. 8).

dramatically.”²⁶ Two months earlier, American planes had been bombing Haiphong harbor even while Soviet ships were docked there, but when Nixon proceeded from Peking to Moscow, he received a most cordial welcome, and the Nixon-Brezhnev talks culminated in the signing of an impressive array of agreements. The U.S.S.R. also launched a major peace offensive in Western Europe after shifting its forces from the Warsaw Pact area to the Sino-Soviet border.²⁷ Faced with a choice between construing Sino-American rapprochement as an anti-Soviet coalition and accepting American assurances that the relative value of the Soviet-American relationship would not be thereby devalued, the Soviets had for the time being chosen the more optimistic interpretation.

We would conclude from this review that the origins of the strategic triangle lay in the demise of polarity between the two camps. This polarity had served not only to define the relationship between the leaders of the two blocs, but also to order and rationalize the patron-client relationships between the bloc leaders and the weaker members of the bloc (including the “stable marriage” between the U.S.S.R. and the P.R.C.). We may generalize, then, that there is a functional correlation between positive and negative relationships: during a period of détente, or the relaxation of enmity, old friendships also lose some of their *raison d'être* and tend to wane; during periods of heightened cold war, on the other hand, solidarity among allies will thrive.

PLAYING THE GAME

We must now establish what would be a rational game plan from the perspective of the individual player, and evaluate each player's performance since 1971 to see whether “winners” and “losers” begin to sort themselves out. This is an analytical rather than a prescriptive task and is meant to be objective in the sense that value judgments not implicit in the definitions of terms and premises are to be avoided.

The U.S.S.R. was placed at an initial disadvantage by the way in which the triangle was introduced; although China's opening to the West certainly did not eliminate a coalition partner (inasmuch as Sino-Soviet relations had already soured so badly), it introduced the novel and unpleasant prospect of collusion between the world's most populous and most technologically advanced nations. The Soviet response

²⁶ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 878; Kissinger (fn. 23), 838.

²⁷ Roger E. Kanet, “The Soviet Union and China,” *Current History*, LXV (October 1973), 145-50.

was, on the one hand, to pursue reconciliation with China, and on the other, to try to thwart further Sino-American collusion. Yet both policies were either fraught with such ambivalence or implemented so maladroitly that they fell short.

The Soviet Union seems to have held an unrealistically optimistic view of what it would take to win reconciliation with China; it attributed the dispute essentially to the megalomania of Mao Zedong and thus expected his death to remove all impediments to renewed amity. That the Soviet post-Mao peace offensive was met by temporary suspension of anti-Soviet polemics but not by a settlement (beyond a 1977 agreement on border river navigation) indicates that, although the Chinese were receptive to Soviet proposals, Moscow was unwilling to make meaningful concessions.²⁸ Even when negotiations resumed late in 1979, the U.S.S.R. firmly rejected China's demands to reduce aid to Vietnam, draw border troop strength down to 1964 levels, and withdraw troops from Outer Mongolia; in fact, in the course of the year troop strength on the Chinese border was increased from 46 to 54 divisions. The Soviet Union was happy to signal its willingness to make peace with the Chinese and let bygones be bygones, but unwilling to do much more than that.

What concessions would the P.R.C. have required? It would probably have acceded to rapprochement if the Soviet Union had repudiated tsarist "unequal treaties" and perhaps agreed to minor territorial adjustments (signifying acceptance of China as a sovereign equal), reduced border troop strength (there is no realistic prospect of a Chinese infantry invasion of the Soviet Union, and in any case Soviet defensive capabilities are more than adequate), and disclaimed any right to intervene in China's domestic affairs. Yet the U.S.S.R. would have some difficulty making these concessions. The territorial issue is sensitive because the Soviets (and their tsarist predecessors) had also annexed territory from Japan and various East European countries, and any cession might set a precedent leading to further claims. The Soviet Union would have a hard time accepting full equality between Moscow and Peking: not only is the Soviet domestic political system hierarchical, but Soviet relations with all foreign communist parties in its orbit have remained hierarchical as well, premised on the "Caesaro-papist" principle legitimating its leadership.²⁹ For the U.S.S.R. to reduce bor-

²⁸ Lieberthal (fn. 21); Thomas Gottlieb, "The Hundred-Day Thaw in China's Soviet Policy," *Contemporary China*, III (Summer 1979), 3-15.

²⁹ Richard Lowenthal, *World Communism: The Disintegration of a Secular Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

der fortifications and negotiate from a position of formal equality would militate against deeply ingrained assumptions concerning the relationship between power and truth. Finally, to disclaim any right to intervene in China's domestic politics would undermine the Brezhnev doctrine and pave the way to the disintegration of COMECON.

Perhaps even more important than the paltry offer the Soviet Union tendered to China was the ambivalent stance it took toward rapprochement. A Soviet peace initiative would be accompanied by continued fortification of the U.S.S.R.'s side of the border and by attempts to promote alliances with China's opponents, such as the friendship treaties with India in 1971 and with Vietnam in 1978. Such treaties might be followed by the provision of sophisticated armaments (often more advanced than those that had been supplied to China), or even by the establishment of basing facilities for the Soviet Navy (as seems to have been the case in Vietnam). In this context, the P.R.C. perceived Soviet proposals for an Asian collective security pact as part of an overall containment strategy, and tended to greet overtures for normalization of Sino-Soviet relations with considerable skepticism. Whatever the success of the Soviet containment strategy, it seems to have foreclosed any possibility of Sino-Soviet rapprochement for the foreseeable future, and should be weighed against that opportunity cost.

In the West, Soviet warnings against arms sales and other forms of Sino-American collusion have been vitiated by a vigorous Soviet-Cuban offensive in support of various client states in the Third World, culminating in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Again, whatever the U.S.S.R.'s gains in this arena (and however lasting they prove to be), such ventures were the surest way of provoking Sino-American collusion.

In sum, whereas the Soviet Union began the 1970s at the height of détente—with realistic options of propitiating China and gaining the pivot, or even converting the Soviet-American link into a stable marriage—by the end of the decade it had gravitated to the position of odd-man-out.

While the Soviet Union has been the net loser in the triangle, the P.R.C. has clearly been the winner—partly because it started the game from a relatively weak position. From a position of estrangement from both other players, China became the second side in a two-sided triangle that swung around an American pivot, thereby increasing its amities from zero to one. Beyond a desire to counter the Soviet threat, China's objectives in opening relations with the United States were to

facilitate the “liberation” of Taiwan and to expedite modernization by means of Western technology. Though the Taiwan question has remained unresolved, the other two objectives were pursued with some success. Although the U.S. has not been as vigorous in countering Soviet global initiatives as the Chinese would prefer, the Soviet strategic threat to the P.R.C. has been allayed (which is undoubtedly China’s top priority). China has entered Western capital and technology markets with great *éclat*, taking an active role in world commerce within a very short time.³⁰

China has at times considered rapprochement with the Soviet Union—a move that would be rational in terms of the game logic because it would reduce the cost of maintaining negative symmetry with the U.S.S.R. and open the way to a two-sided triangle pivoting around Peking (with the U.S. not taking umbrage at a Sino-Soviet rapprochement provided it was assured that Sino-American relations would not be jeopardized). But in view of the Soviet Union’s military superiority, the long and heavily fortified border, and the historical proximity of their clash of arms, China has been unable to overcome its profound suspicion of the U.S.S.R.; secure opposition still seems preferable to the dangers of manipulation or subversion by a mistrusted partner. In attempting to secure the Sino-American relationship, it is also in China’s interest to discourage Soviet-American collusion (as already noted, the potential danger of such collusion was a major factor in motivating China’s entry into the triangle). Thus, in the bilateral talks leading to normalization, the Chinese structured the negotiations so that those negotiators (such as Brzezinski) and those sessions (such as his May 1978 visit) that produced the harshest denunciations of Soviet international misbehavior were rewarded with the most impressive “break-throughs” toward normalization. Immediately after the establishment of ambassadorial relations, Deng Xiaoping arranged his January 1979 visit to the United States to create the impression of Sino-American collusion in China’s punitive attack on Vietnam on February 17. The Chinese have thus shown considerable skill in “playing the American card” to bluff the Soviets.

Since 1978, the Sino-American relationship has gradually come to approximate a stable marriage. With most-favored-nation status and entry into the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the P.R.C. acquired clear economic preferment over the U.S.S.R., and since

³⁰ See Japan External Trade Organization, *China: A Business Guide—The Japanese Perspective on China's Opening Economy* (Tokyo: Japan External Trade Organization and Press International, Ltd., 1979), 67-103.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown's visit to China in January 1980 and the return visit of his counterpart, Geng Biao, five months later, there has been increasing public reference to a quasi-military alliance. Thus far, this seems to imply the sale of sophisticated civilian and nonlethal military technology, the withdrawal of an American veto to the European sale of actual military equipment, and some coordination of joint strategies to counter Soviet expansion.³¹ As the weaker partner, China may seek to promote bloc unity and militancy as a shield behind which it can pursue limited offensive maneuvers (e.g., Vietnam in 1978), much as it attempted to play the "Soviet card" in the Taiwan Straits imbroglio of 1958.

The most important shift for the United States since 1971 has been from pivot position in a romantic triangle to senior partner in a stable marriage. It would follow from the premises of the game that the latter is a less advantageous position than the former, and that a rational player would avoid such a shift unless the attrition of either wing renders the pivot position untenable. So why did it occur?

We have already noted that the Sino-American rapprochement was stage-managed to suggest anti-Soviet collusion between the two countries. To the degree that this factor precipitated the deterioration in Soviet-American relations, the P.R.C. may be said to have "outplayed" the U.S., making strategic gains at American expense: junior partnership in a stable marriage is a more secure position for the Chinese to be in than wing position in a romantic triangle. But the deterioration in Soviet-American relations *preceded* the normalization of Sino-American relations, having taken a perceptible turn for the worse in the period between 1975 and 1977. It therefore seems reasonable to attribute the decline more to bilateral difficulties than to China's admittedly provocative behavior.

According to the logic of the game, both the Soviet Union and the United States have suffered from the deterioration of their bilateral relationship—the U.S.S.R. by dropping from a wing position in a romantic triangle to a pariah position facing a stable marriage, and the U.S. by shifting from the pivot in the former to senior partnership in the latter. So the question of responsibility for that deterioration is an unusually sensitive and controversial one. One may also wonder

³¹ A Chinese military official told a visiting Senate delegation that Beijing favored a countervailing U.S. naval buildup in the Pacific and would welcome port calls by the U.S. Seventh Fleet. When the Iranian revolution deprived the United States of its intelligence-gathering ground stations near the Caspian Sea, Deng Xiaoping suggested that the U.S. could set up facilities in the P.R.C. to monitor Soviet missile test launches in Central Asia. Strobe Talbott, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: From Bad to Worse," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58 (No. 3, 1980), 15-39.

whether either side has made compensatory gains, but it is difficult to supply precise or objective answers. From the American perspective, Soviet-Cuban military collaboration in support of various leftist regimes in Africa and the Middle East was *prima facie* evidence of Soviet cheating—part of a grand strategy designed to overthrow the international status quo.³² The invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was another significant step in the escalation of tactics employed, involving Soviet troops in military combat beyond bloc borders for the first time since World War II. The rules of the game regulating superpower competition in the Third World under détente were never very clearly formulated, but, in view of the American performance in Vietnam, the Soviet Union might perhaps be forgiven for inferring that it is permissible to intervene militarily on behalf of client states. True—the U.S. intended merely to maintain the international status quo, whereas the U.S.S.R. meant to upset it; but it is also true that since Vietnam, the Soviet Union has been intervening far more actively in Third-World conflicts than has the United States. In any event, the original understanding had indicated that such peripheral issues should not be allowed to interfere with the central concerns of détente (e.g., strategic arms control). Here it was the United States, increasingly perturbed by perceived Soviet gains in the Third World and yet inhibited by domestic public opinion from intervening effectively, that seems to have first violated the understanding by making SALT II ratification contingent upon quiescent Soviet behavior in Africa. Such “linkage” tends to reduce progress in all other areas of détente to the pace attained in the most problematic ones.³³ If the Soviet gains in the Third World—however fairly won in terms of the original rules of the game—were considered so disequilibrating that countermeasures were deemed necessary to redress the power balance, it would have been preferable from the perspective of salvaging a positive Soviet-American relationship to confine the dispute to the Third World. Various solutions might be found there—perhaps by coming to an understanding over global spheres of influence (at present the United States tends to define all areas in the world outside the Soviet bloc as being within its sphere of influence), or by devising some more effective local or regional strategy (such as covert arms aid to guerrillas, or use of “proxy” forces) to counter Cuban-Soviet military intervention.

Détente also presupposes some diminution of the role of ideology

³² Donald Zagoria, “Into the Breach: New Soviet Alliances in the Third World,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57 (No. 4, 1979), 733-54.

³³ Lawrence Caldwell and Alexander Dallin, “U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union,” in Oye and others (fn. 1), 199-228.

(which would otherwise dictate implacable enmity between the two systems), and the cultivation of various (apolitical) ties designed to foster understanding and friendship between the two countries. There was a perceptible diminution of ideological rhetoric on the American side during the Nixon-Ford years, as well as a proliferation of cultural exchanges, business transactions, and other forms of social interchange; it is difficult to detect any corresponding decrease in the Soviet propaganda offensive, although Brezhnev's approval of the Helsinki agreement at the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe represented a significant concession, with attendant risks. By initiating a global crusade against human rights violations in 1976, the Carter administration unleashed great mischief within the Soviet dissident community, encouraging activities Washington was in no way prepared to support consequentially. The United States could also not forbear taking advantage of the Soviet Union's vulnerability to cultural and social exchange (because of lower living standards and heavier reliance on repression) to cultivate critical and even anti-Communist intellectuals (offering them asylum, fame, and publication outlets) and to demand, quite successfully, a high rate of emigration for certain national minorities (Jews, Volga Germans, Armenians). There is little doubt that the U.S. considers internal liberalization and possibly eventual regime transformation one of the long-term desiderata of détente, but such goals must be pursued with a certain amount of subtlety and patience if they are not to elicit a counterproductive response from Soviet leaders. The latter no doubt prefer their regime to remain the way it is and regard any attempt to encourage domestic groups to oppose it as an insidious misuse of purported channels of mutual understanding and friendship. That is not to say that the West should refrain from calling for more liberal emigration or censorship policies, or stifle its indignation when these are rescinded; but it should also positively reinforce the Soviet leadership on whatever progress is made, rather than exploit each concession to demonstrate the barbarity of the Soviet system and make further demands. Admittedly, the Soviet Union also uses cultural and social contacts to advance its national interests—primarily to try to overcome certain areas of scientific and technological inferiority—but it does not necessarily do so in order to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. government. Since Afghanistan, all these areas of social interchange have seriously deteriorated—as most visibly symbolized, of course, by cancellation of American participation in the Moscow Olympics. Again, if the U.S. considers a positive Soviet-American relationship more important than the “loss” of Afghanistan,

Ethiopia, or South Yemen, that relationship should be insulated as much as possible from such disturbances; more effective tactics to counter violations in peripheral arenas should be sought.

In view of the vast destructiveness of the combined nuclear arsenals, it is not surprising that strategic arms control and disarmament has always held pride of place in *détente*. Although SALT I heralded the advent of strategic parity, and both signatories have gone on record in support of this concept and the general need to cooperate to limit the arms race,³⁴ there are powerful political groupings on both sides who have not accepted this idea. In a delicate balance of terror, marked by technological volatility and unpredictable shifts in the advantage that innovations bestow to offense and defense, parity seems less secure to both than superiority; so both sides struggle for asymmetry even while attempting to regulate the competition. Although regulation is considered preferable to a war that would inflict intolerable losses upon victor as well as vanquished, competition is sustained by the prospect that some technological breakthrough will lend its host the requisite edge to make war (or its threat) a rational instrument of national policy once again. It is this intense but aim-inhibited competition for primacy that makes *détente* so unstable and tends to infiltrate every other channel, no matter how well-intentioned.

In sum, the Soviet-American relationship deteriorated because, in the wake of a general American withdrawal, the Soviet Union appeared for a time to be “winning” *détente*; even though its gains could plausibly be construed as having been legitimately achieved, the resulting shift in the international balance of power was considered disequilibrating and unacceptable to the United States. Rather than take effective steps to counter Soviet advances in those arenas in which they had been won, the U.S. allowed the entire relationship to worsen. China certainly supported and abetted this shift, which reduced its insecurity and increased its leverage without committing it in the way that an alliance would. (Dependency is more reciprocal in a stable marriage than in a romantic triangle.) But ultimate responsibility rests with Moscow and Washington.

³⁴ In internal debate lasting from 1974 to 1977, Soviet civilian politicians clearly laid down the line of superpower equality and the unthinkability of nuclear war. Brezhnev first went public with the new doctrine at the 1971 Congress of the CPSU, when he discarded earlier calls to “preserve the superiority” of Soviet weapons and defined the Soviet goal in the SALT negotiations as “the security of the parties considered equally.” He reaffirmed this statement in January 1977. In 1974, he termed the world’s nuclear stockpiles excessive, asserting that “there is an immeasurably greater risk in continuing to accumulate weapons without restraint” than in reducing arsenals, as stockpiles were already “sufficient to destroy everything living on earth several times.” Soviet military

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper has been to conceive of the interests and situational constraints acting upon the three leading participants in an ongoing international relationship as logically consistent “rules” in a coherent transactional “game,” which each player must adhere to if it wishes to “win.” It is assumed that each player will seek to maximize benefits and minimize risks or losses, and will pursue its objectives rationally. The game’s logic has implications both for *policy* issues (that is, which “moves” are of greatest advantage to the individual player under various conceivable contingencies), and broader *systemic* issues (that is, what causes the game as a whole to sustain or change its pattern dynamics).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the foreseeable future, the United States seems most likely to play one of three positions in two of the three conceivable patterns. These positions are not equally advantageous, but competition for the best position will be keen and the U.S. may be outmaneuvered. They are, listed in inverse order of relative advantage: outside player in someone else’s stable marriage, senior partner in a stable marriage, and pivot player in a romantic triangle.

The outside position in a stable marriage, analogous to the position of “it” in a game of keep-away, is least advantageous because the player is frozen out of amities with either of the others and must cope with two enmities. The position requires greater economic self-reliance and a heavy investment in armaments in order to deter, if not to equal, the combined military prowess of both other players; its sole advantage is to preclude the possibility of cheating or asymmetry by a (nonexistent) partner. Although this attraction is small indeed, it has sufficed to appeal to those political groups characterized by an inordinate national self-confidence and/or a profound suspicion for alliances of convenience: the “Gang of Four” in China, the Soviet “new right,”⁸⁵ and the American old right have at different points advocated such a “go it alone” strategy. The U.S. played this position in the 1950s, the P.R.C. in the 1960s, and the U.S.S.R. seems most likely to play it in the 1980s

resistance to such revisionism in the course of the debate indicates that these assertions were not merely a propaganda exercise to lull the West.

⁸⁵ Alexander Yanov, *The Russian New Right: Right-Wing Ideologies in the Contemporary USSR*, Policy Paper in International Affairs, No. 35 (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of International Studies, 1978).

—though the United States might be obliged to reassume it in the event of Sino-Soviet collusion.

A rational strategy for a player in this position is to build a cluster of patron-client ties with smaller states in the hope of constituting a bloc strong and cohesive enough to counter the combined strength of the other two players: the United States attempted this in the 1950s with NATO, CENTO, SEATO, and so forth; China in the 1960s tried to adopt the nonaligned movement; more recently, the Soviet Union has attempted to integrate the military forces of the Warsaw Pact and to increase defense spending. It has also adopted an alliance-seeking and base-building approach to Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. A player who is “it” must shoulder a heavier defense burden than the other members of the triangle in order to maintain a strategic balance. It should also try not to provoke them needlessly—not only because the two-to-one power ratio must be considered forbidding no matter how successful the bloc building or how resourceful the armaments program, but also because the player’s ultimate objective should be to court and “seduce” the most susceptible member of the stable marriage, thereby breaking up the opposing combination and opening the way to a new and more advantageous pattern. The incentive for “courting” is greatest for the weakest member of the triangle (*viz.*, China); moreover, its prospects of overcoming two-to-one odds through self-reliance are least realistic.

All this would seem merely prudent, and yet there does seem to be an inherent propensity for players in the pariah position to take a defiant, even an aggressive stance. At no time was the American anti-Communist impulse more militant than in the 1950s, for example; in the 1960s, China took a highly provocative stance toward both “superpowers”; and recent Soviet behavior, with regard both to suppression of domestic dissidents and aid to fraternal regimes in Africa, Southeast Asia, or the “Northern tier,” often seems deliberately calculated to antagonize either the United States or China. Such a defiant and provocative posture is perhaps understandable in view of the outside player’s beleaguered position, but it is nonetheless irrational and should be avoided, for it only consolidates the opposing coalition.

Senior partnership in a stable marriage—the position *vis-à-vis* China that the U.S. seems to have inherited from the U.S.S.R.—offers a more advantageous power ratio and more benefits than the “it” position, without the serious danger of disadvantageous asymmetry. The uncertainty is somewhat greater, for partnership entails the risk of cheating

or a double-cross. A player in this position must perform two different but interdependent tasks: retain its partner's loyalty, and maintain a modicum of enmity with its opponent.

A partner's loyalty may be retained, first, by ensuring that there is no asymmetry of bilateral relations (the U.S.S.R. forfeited the P.R.C.'s loyalty by taking advantage of such an asymmetry).³⁶ Unfortunately, there is no quantifiable "balance of trade" in such relations; the assessment of symmetry remains subjective and political, but it is important that neither side (particularly the more vulnerable) *feel* cheated. Second, by increasing tension with the common opponent, it is possible to enhance loyalty by giving the union a *raison d'être*.

Maintaining a modicum of enmity with one's opponent thus implies, on the one hand, that sufficient tension be maintained to retain a "stable marriage." On the other hand, it is advisable not to raise the tension too high, in order to avoid both the costs of an arms race and the risk that a cornered adversary will resort to ill-advised and ill-considered measures. Moreover, it is in the long-term interest of a senior partner in a stable marriage to reach some sort of accommodation with the opponent—if this can be done without alienating one's partner—thereby transforming the pattern to a romantic triangle with the former senior partner as pivot. The junior partner may, however, seek to foreclose such a move by escalating tension with the joint opponent (as China has seemed determined to do since 1978).

The pivot position in a romantic triangle is the most advantageous one available, permitting amities with two other players and enmities with none, thereby maximizing benefits while minimizing expenditures for sanctions. Uncertainty is, however, also maximized (the risk of double-cross is twice that of a stable marriage), but the uncertainty tends to work in the pivot's favor, as the other players are placed in positions of dependency. All the same, the position demands great delicacy and balance and is extremely difficult to play well. The pivot must maintain positive relations with both "wing" players while at the same time attempting to manage the level of tension between them.

In order to maintain positive relations with both wing players, the pivot must be sensitive not only to pivot-wing bilateral issues (such as avoiding asymmetry), but also to the relationship of the wings to each other. Each wing player will be acutely conscious of the possibility that the other may "marry" the pivot and thereby shut it out, and will thus

³⁶ See Dennis M. Ray, "Chinese Perceptions of Social Imperialism and Economic Dependency: The Impact of Soviet Aid," *Stanford Journal of International Studies*, x (Spring 1975), 36-83.

strive to avoid that situation by acting first. The wing players are apt to feel disadvantaged even if bilateral relations are scrupulously “fair,” because of the persisting tension with the other wing and the one-sided dependency of both on the pivot. It is probably impossible to remain completely even-handed in dealing with the two wing players, for each will have different interests, different bargaining strategies, different capabilities, and different offers that will be more or less appealing. The important point in maintaining a romantic triangle is to convince each wing player that the pivot’s relationship with the other is not based on shared antagonism; to this end, the pivot should be as candid as possible with each wing about its relationship with the other in order to dispel anxieties about collusion (some of which may be expected to persist anyhow). As Kissinger writes:

We had to walk a narrow path. We would make these agreements with the Soviet Union which we considered in our national interest. But we would give no encouragement to visions of condominium, and we would resist any attempt by Moscow to achieve hegemony over China or elsewhere. We would keep China informed of our negotiations with the Soviet Union in considerable detail; we would take account of Peking’s views. But we would not give Peking a veto over our actions.³⁷

The reason the initial opening to the P.R.C. brought about a dramatic improvement in Soviet-American relations whereas the normalization of Sino-American relations in December 1978 precipitated a perceptible deterioration in Soviet-American relations may be attributed to a decline in Washington’s ability to convince the Soviet Union that the Sino-American relationship was entirely innocent. In fact, the United States tended to react to every new indication of Soviet truculence with overtures to the Chinese for further “complementary actions” to contain the U.S.S.R., confirming the Soviet Union’s paranoid suspicions and (from its point of view) justifying a harder line. It was not simply a difference between “playing” and “having played” the China card, but a difference between a noncollusive and a collusive liaison.³⁸

Some tension between the two wing players is in the interest of the pivot player, both to forestall collusion and to deflect the targeting of weapons to the wing rivalry that might otherwise be aimed at the pivot. At the same time, too much tension would induce both wings to demand exclusive loyalty from the pivot and thus trigger polarization.

³⁷ Kissinger (fn. 23), 836-37.

³⁸ See Garrett (fn. 1); also Garrett, “The China Card: To Play or Not To Play,” *Contemporary China*, III (Spring 1979), 3-18.

There is some controversy over the degree of the pivot's discretion in managing tension between the two wings. The last view of the Carter administration on this issue was rather dim, asserting essentially that U.S. relations with the two wing players are basically bilateral, to be determined independently of each other. The present analysis is, however, based on the *inescapable* triangularity of bilateral relationships: the pivot has the capability to exacerbate tension by shifting its weight to one side or the other in the dispute, or to assuage the conflict by declining to take sides.

SYSTEMIC IMPLICATIONS

There are two questions concerning the dynamics of the game as a whole. First, what are the factors that cause the game to shift its pattern dynamics—i.e., to change from a one- to a two-sided game, from a two- to a one-sided game, and so forth, and what are the factors that militate against such shifts? The second, more general question is whether any overall direction of shifts or stabilization points are inherent in the logic of the game.

The factor that seems most conducive to shifts in pattern dynamics is an abrupt increase in the game's general level of tension, followed by a decline in tension. The decline in tension is necessary to permit a realignment of partners that would seem intolerably risky during a crisis; and an increase in tension most clearly reveals stakes and priorities for the actors involved, contributing to a decision to realign once the crisis is over. Thus, the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1958 proved to be the turning point in the Sino-Soviet relationship; the first Soviet-American détente followed the Cuban missile crisis; and Sino-American détente followed the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash. Crisis engenders a greater need for security and promotes realism, since ideological positioning becomes an unaffordable luxury in view of the high security stakes; resolution of the crisis then offers the opportunity to realign.

Mutual commitment to a common ideology or formal treaty seems to be the most effective way of freezing given pattern dynamics, though it has its limits. Indeed, the Soviet Union and China have become so bitterly estranged in spite of the same ideology that their enmity may constitute the most stable element of the current triangular pattern. How can this paradox be explained? To revert once more to the mating metaphor, friendship treaties and ideologies seem to function in somewhat the same way as marriage vows: on the one hand, they so sanctify the union that it can better endure the vicissitudes of fortune; on the other, they create such a taboo that if the

marriage dissolves, it does so at considerable emotional cost and with a lingering sense of outrage. In the case of the Sino-Soviet dispute, the “divorce” was more damaging to the Soviet Union as ex-leader of an ideological crusade than to China as ex-satellite; therefore, the former seems to have clung more tenaciously to the ideology of union and to the hope that the prodigal will return eventually. Amid a worldwide decline in ideological fervor, Chinese foreign policy (like Yugoslav foreign policy, and for similar reasons) seems to have undergone an induced secularization more rapid and complete than that of the U.S.S.R., abandoning a radical challenge to the international status quo in favor of the skillful pursuit of *Realpolitik*. The Chinese punitive incursion into Vietnam in 1979 was a clash of national interests without any ideological rationale, for instance. The Chinese do not even call the CPSU “revisionist” any longer.

The overall direction of shift from one pattern dynamic to another is dependent upon the optimum cumulative benefits, risks, and costs that accrue to all players in the game. If there is an imbalance in this distribution, those placed at a disadvantage may be expected to try to rectify it. The game’s developmental propensity will therefore *not* necessarily coincide with the objectives of the individual player, though the latter has an interest in understanding the former in order to plan rational moves. For example, although a pivot position in a romantic triangle is the most advantageous position in the game, this configuration is unstable because of its unequal distribution of benefits and security; *this implies that inordinate sensitivity and skill are required to maintain the position against pressures for change from either wing.*

*If we assume that the game will naturally tend to gravitate to the pattern dynamic that returns the greatest benefit to all players at least cost, it would follow from its premises that it should spiral “upward,” from a stable marriage to a romantic triangle to a *ménage à trois*. However, if we examine the evolution of the triangle since World War II, it would seem that in terms of frequency, the opposite tendency prevails: the stable marriage seems to be the norm and the *ménage à trois* has not yet evolved.*

Perhaps the most important single reason for the failure of empirical reality to conform to theoretical rationality is the dominant importance of the factor of risk. The threat of massive nuclear destruction that each player poses to the others diminishes such positive inducements as trade flows or cultural exchanges, and creates an atmosphere of intense suspicion. Suspicion is intensified by the technological volatility of the arms race. Although it depletes both participants, usually without enhancing

the security of either, the arms race is sustained by the prospect that some dramatic breakthrough will make it possible for one player either pre-emptively to destroy the other's offensive capability or to survive a second strike—thus making a first strike plausible and returning warfare to its classic Clausewitzian role as a continuation of politics by other means.³⁹ This prospect of qualitative innovation is one of the obstacles that lie in the way of regulation through SALT. Another is, of course, the vested interest that the arms industry and its bureaucratic supporters have acquired in sustaining a given level of productivity.

But the volatility is not merely technological. In the domestic political arena, a politician may cope with a threat either by conciliating the threatening party if the threat is not too grave, or by overcoming and perhaps even eliminating it (depending on domestic political culture). A tendency to transpose the domestic rules of the game to the international arena leads both politicians and their domestic audiences to display a consistent ambivalence about foreign powers who pose a security threat. They are uncertain whether to cooperate in jointly beneficial relationships or to do everything possible to undermine and destroy the other side. Western observers have recognized this ambiguity in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union (and sometimes the P.R.C.), often attributing it to ideological Messianism, but have less frequently detected such tendencies in American foreign policy. Of course, the domestic political payoffs for such broadmindedness are limited; in view of the standing threat posed by the other player, any attempt at cooperation is apt to be viewed as appeasement. *Détente* tends to coincide with the disintegration of alliances and with the rise of dissident movements, developments particularly threatening to bloc leaders. International polarization tends to concentrate tension, whereas *détente* tends to disperse it; the former situation is more dangerous, but in some ways more manageable and certainly less ambiguous than the

³⁹ One of the reasons for the deterioration of Soviet-American relations is to be found in recent changes in the nuclear balance, which have led some Western observers to infer that the Soviet Union is on its way to a disabling first-strike capability; these may plausibly have led Soviet observers to the reverse conclusion. Among the technological innovations that make the pre-emptive destruction of land-based hardened missile silos feasible are *MIRV* capability and the more recent improvements in missile accuracy (which have resulted from unanticipated advances in such areas as computer and engine microminiaturization, order-of-magnitude acceleration of data processing, inertial navigation, American Navstar satellite position fixing of submarines to within 10 meters in three dimensions regardless of weather, gravity and geodesy positioning, real-time satellite reconnaissance of ground information, preprogrammed terminal homing computers in warheads, terrain-matching, and rapid retargeting of both *ICBMs* and *SLBMs*). If either side were to achieve a unilateral breakthrough in laser defense against missiles, this could also radically alter the strategic balance.

latter. For détente to be politically feasible, not only should international crises which may be expected to mobilize domestic opposition be avoided; some understanding should also be reached to forbear using social penetration in order to incite dissident movements. Otherwise, the insecurity of the regime will increase (thereby jeopardizing further rapprochement).

Suspicion is probably endemic to the anarchic character of the international arena; any attempt to eliminate it altogether must be dismissed as utopian. The most that might be hoped for is that the principals involved come to understand that they have long-term as well as short-term interests, and that the former require that the interests of the other major actors also be taken into account. The minimal objectives of any prudent foreign policy under current circumstances must be the "national interest"; but more ecumenical arrangements might be adopted as a *maximal* objective, to be striven for whenever it does not jeopardize the minimal objective. Such a viewpoint could certainly be formulated at an ideological level, and might under some circumstances even have an impact upon policy.