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China's foreign policy is misunderstood

China doesn't want to forge an anti-Western alliance with Russia — but to cooperate with the West on shared interests in a multipolar world

Fifty years ago last week, President Nixon made a landmark visit to Beijing that thawed tensions with China and reshaped the geopolitics of the Cold War. After the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s had effectively turned a bipolar world order into a 'tripolarity', Nixon's trip and the rapprochement it symbolised substantially altered the balance of power in the triangle of China-Soviet-US relations.

The 'strategic triangle' was the dominant frame through which geopolitics was understood at the height of the Cold War. It largely fell dormant with the fall of the USSR but has now been revived by some Western observers, with Putin's Russia filling in for the Soviet Union.

This revival has been triggered by events in Ukraine and the joint statement between China and Russia on 4 February , which was seen by some as a mirror moment of Nixon's 1972 China visit – one that today brought Beijing and Moscow together against the US. It has generated a wave of headlines in the US warning of 'The New Axis of Autocracy', an 'alliance of autocracies', and a 'New Superpower Struggle Among US, Russia, and China'.

But whatever the Cold War echoes in the current Ukraine crisis, applying this 20th-century triangular framing to our world today is a dangerous and misguided anachronism, for three major reasons.

The multipolar world

First, it misreads China's relations with Russia and intentions vis-à-vis the West. Ultimately, China wants to stabilise and improve ties with the US and its allies, not forge an anti-Western alliance with Russia.

The next major flaw with the triangular view is that our world is not tripolar, or indeed bipolar, but multipolar.

The 4 February statement was a commitment to work together on shared interests, not the declaration of a joint anti-Western front that some have made it out to be. China has no alliance with Russia and has never supported a Russian invasion of Ukraine, as made clear again recently by Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call to respect the sovereignty of any country and find a solution to the Ukraine crisis through dialogue and consultation.

For all the budding talk of ties with Moscow, it is worth remembering that China's economic interests with Russia are dwarfed by those it shares with the West. In 2021, bilateral trade between China and Russia jumped by 35 per cent to a value of $147bn. This was still less than a tenth of the combined trade with the US ($657bn) and EU ($828.1bn).

Russia may be a big fish militarily, but it is an economic minnow in long-term structural decline, with a GDP barely larger than that of the EU's fifth-largest economy, Spain. It is not in China's interests to open up a long-term confrontation against the West with such a partner and there is no intention of doing so.

The EU's quest for strategic autonomy

The next major flaw with the triangular view is that our world is not tripolar, or indeed bipolar, but multipolar. The Cold War framing leaves out important geopolitical players, not least the EU, which has major interests at stake in Ukraine and is pursuing an increasingly independent foreign policy.

True, the EU has traditionally punched below its weight strategically and the Ukraine crisis has temporarily reinvigorated the transatlantic alliance. But the EU no longer wishes to be hemmed to the US position and appears to be at the dawn of a new political era in which it will carve out its own global role.

There is a danger that framing the world as a strategic triangle of competing powers will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With Angela Merkel gone and Germany's new chancellor Olaf Scholz still finding his feet, Emmanuel Macron is set to be the EU's dominant voice for some time to come, provided he wins the upcoming presidential election in April as expected.

The French president is a strong proponent of 'strategic autonomy' for the EU and has made it clear the EU should not gang up on China with the US. In a call with President Xi Jinping on 16 February, the leaders pledged that China and the EU will work together on shared interests like trade, the delayed China-EU investment agreement (opposed by the US), and climate change.

This is not another Cold War

The issue of climate brings us to the third and perhaps the most important reason Cold War framings are an unhelpful way to view power and security in the 21st century.

In an age of global threats that cannot be overcome by brute force or any country acting alone, to focus solely on 'power over' other countries is to neglect the more important dimension of 'power with' other countries to tackle our shared challenges. The need to consider power in both its competitive and cooperative forms should be clear as we continue to face a global pandemic and looming climate emergency.

There is a danger that framing the world as a strategic triangle of competing powers will become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lock us into a zero-sum view of our interests, when in fact the biggest threats we face come not from other states, but from a collective failure to cooperate on our shared challenges.

Fifty years ago, the leaders of China and America were able to put pragmatism over ideology to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough that reshaped the Cold War triangle and served the interests of both countries.

But reviving this outdated view of the world half a century later will only push China and Russia closer together, raising the risk of great-power conflict, and hampering our ability to work together on existential threats that go far beyond Ukraine.



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