

The World Order

An Unbalanced Triad

Wednesday 23 December 2020, by [VANAIAK Achin](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2020).

Analysis of the current and emergent correlation of forces between US-China-Russia points towards a new era of one super-imperialist power coexisting with a triadic form of major inter-imperialist tensions.

The label “New Cold War” applied to the growing confrontation between the United States (US) and China is a term that hides more than it illuminates, especially when it implies a fundamental similarity in the character of major state rivalries in the post-World War II period from 1945 to 1989-91—a conjuncture shaped by the geoeconomics and geopolitics of that time—and the emerging world order today. There is in fact a profound difference between the former era and the present one.

What existed then was a systemic rivalry between two incompatible orders that had profoundly different dynamics of social and economic reproduction expressing itself in an enduring clash of geopolitical ambitions and practices. This incompatibility was widely recognised giving rise to a sustained ideological hostility. The specific features of that global conjuncture were as follows.

First, the bipolar bloc confrontation was criss-crossed by various nationalist rivalries within the Communist bloc—Asia (Sino-Soviet), Indochina (China-Vietnam-Kampuchea), Balkans (Moscow-Belgrade). Second, there was unjustified post-World War II Soviet political-military domination over the countries of Eastern Europe, but this was part of the excuses offered, not the key reasons for the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) containment policy against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Third, there were no serious capitalist inter-imperialist rivalries because of a US super-imperialism ensuring that European imperialisms—whether British, French, Spanish or Portuguese—were basically subordinate or complementary to its own ambitions. Fourth, there were US-led actual or proxy wars (including support for apartheid South Africa’s external military interventions) against national liberation movements of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in the Third World, many of which were looking for, or getting support from the USSR, China or Cuba. Fifth, there was widespread Western (particularly US) support for dictatorial regimes faced with progressive or socialist-led struggles internally.

These characteristics are not fundamentally explainable by standard realist “balance of power” thinking although a realist dimension of behaviour can certainly be said to exist. For example, Sino-US entente vis-à-vis USSR; US-China-Kampuchea line-up against Vietnam.

After the Fall

After the collapse of the Communist bloc, the break-up of USSR and the internal transitions to capitalism, above all in the two biggest nuclear-armed countries of Russia and China, a new era is established. This new conjuncture witnessed “victory” on the one side and “defeat” on the other, that is, the end of systemic conflict and the compulsions emerging from that foundational socio-economic-political-ideological difference. The characteristics of the contemporary era are the

following.

First, in this era, Russia and China have been basically reactive powers to the US. Neither wanted the US to see it as a strategic opponent, let alone as a strategic enemy but were and are determined to be independent (not subordinate to the US like the major West European countries) and to assert themselves as imperialist powers in their own right.

Second, it is US behaviour and initiatives that have basically determined the unfolding trajectory of the respective Russian and Chinese relationships with the US. This is not to deny the role played by their own respective ambitions in influencing their bilateral relationship with the US; but the main strategic driver has always been what the US thinks and does.

Third, the emergence of Russia and China as major capitalist powers is, historically and sociologically speaking, fundamentally different from that of the major European and Japanese imperialisms. The ruling classes of Russia and China have emerged completely independent of the US-dominated world order of post-World War I or World War II, and indeed in basic opposition to the US and Western Europe. Today Russia, and especially China, are bureaucratic capitalisms having a basic imbrication of the ruling class and the state that is quite different from the relationship between the ruling class and the state in the advanced capitalisms of the West, and even in Japan. They will do their best not to become politically subordinate to the US, hence the relative durability of tensions between the US, and China and Russia.

Fourth, the US is still the super-imperialist power vis-à-vis Europe (West and East) and Japan as well as with regard to other emerging/aspiring regional imperialisms (or sub-imperialisms) like Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, South Africa, possibly Indonesia, certainly Israel. These latter countries are not going to seriously challenge the US or make alliances against it whatever the differences on this or that issue or policy. Iran is a regional power but unlike the others is seriously besieged and does seek a closer relationship with Russia and China against the US. However, the latter two, while seeing economic value and a certain degree of political leverage vis-à-vis the US in maintaining such ties, will certainly not establish alliances and will not hesitate to jettison Iran if they deem it necessary.

The Triad

However, unlike the past when the key fault line of the world order was the systemic divide, in today's capitalist world order (one can safely ignore Cuba and North Korea as outliers) the dominant characteristic is the US informal empire project—a super-imperialism coexisting with serious inter-imperialist tensions given the challenges posed to it by Russia and China. This is, and will remain, a contest between one truly global power and two regional ones.

The US for a prolonged period after 1991 prepared on two fronts vis-à-vis China. It made preparations both to treat China as a potential strategic opponent (even a possible enemy) and also to treat it as not such a potential opponent let alone enemy, given the strength of the economic relationships established between the two countries. There the relationships have no parallel with the economic relationships of the US with either Russia or China in that earlier period of a systemic divide, despite the Sino-US political entente of those times. In Bill Clinton's presidency there was official talk of a "constructive strategic partnership," no less. As China's economic and military power has grown, the US foreign policy mainstream consensus shifted to seeing it first more as a "strategic competitor" and rival, hence Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia;" and now finally arriving at the view that China is a strategic opponent with some voices in Washington portraying it even as a strategic enemy. It should be noted that in 2010, the US military officially adopted the "Air Sea Battle" doctrine significantly strengthening its forces in East Asia with the primary military focus on

China. A Joe Biden presidency will not change this basic orientation.

Given this new reality, both countries are seeking in their different ways to economically and politically outflank the other with China seeking to establish a stronger military presence. On the military and nuclear front, the US remains the principal instigator of the ongoing arms race with both Russia and China, not least through the militarisation-nuclearisation of outer space. The US pursues this effort at political-military containment through NATO and its Asia-Pacific security arrangements of various kinds, the key ones being the US-South Korea and US-Japan tie-up and more recently the Quad, whose principal three nodes for the US are India, Japan and Australia. The US has developed and positioned, at its bases in East Asia and the Pacific, medium-range conventionally armed missiles that can devastate the coastal regions of China which are also its primary industrial centres.

Furthermore, the US seeks economic pressurising through its much stronger influence within the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). China pursues its effort to economically counter the US and widen its sphere of economic-political influence through its Belt Road Initiative (BRI), which includes transcontinental maritime security arrangements, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Asia Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB).

Russia's economy is more fragile than that of China given its greater reliance on raw materials exports and lesser domestic dynamism. In its bilateral relations with China it has concerns about the latter's expanding economic and therefore political weight in Eurasia even as Russia retains its military strength and has no concerns on that score. Quite apart from the fact that the US continues to be the pace-setter in the nuclear and conventional arms build-up (thereby putting serious economic pressures on both China and Russia whose respective per capita incomes remain well below that of the US), the US continues to exert political-military pressure on its western flank, having extended NATO into Eastern Europe, the Baltic Republics and into the Balkans. This is bad enough from Moscow's point of view but the US is also seeking to deepen its ties with Ukraine—the second biggest power after Russia that emerged from the Soviet break-up—as well as with Georgia and would be happy to extend the influence of itself and allies in Central Asia. All this creates real pressure on today's imperialist Russia that insists upon retaining dominant influence on its “near abroad.” Despite Moscow's unease with Beijing about the growing asymmetry in economic strength and therefore political influence between the two, the basis for a longer-term strategic relationship between Russia and China is thus laid.

Primacy of the US

The US has assets that will enable it to retain number one position while economically it will experience relative but not absolute economic decline, and even though China surpasses it in total gross domestic product (GDP) terms. But China will never reach the per capita GDP levels of a prosperous Western European country or that of the US or Japan. As the perceptive observer Perry Anderson (2002) has outlined, these US assets are as follows: First, it is the largest advanced capitalist country (Russia is not an advanced capitalist country) in the world, constantly nourished by the immigration to its shores of the young and talented, including from China itself. Second, it is the strongest capitalist country in the world not just militarily (which is obvious), but technologically. Given its unmatched military research and development and university research structures, it is ahead in most though not all hi-tech frontier areas. Third, it is, unlike China or Russia, the most politically unified country with no internal political-territorial challenges of any kind contrasting with Russia (Crimea and Chechnya) or China (Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). Fourth, it is the safest capitalist country in the world. Where would the wealthiest of people

and the members of all ruling classes everywhere want to park at least some of their money to ensure its enduring safety? Would it be in China or Russia or in Wall Street and the US? The question answers itself! The US dollar will remain the most important international currency whatever advances the Yuan or Euro may make.

Moreover, the relationship of forces between capital and labour in the US is heavily weighted in favour of the former. The authoritarian regimes of Russia and China are much more seriously challenged should sociopolitical struggles reach a certain critical mass. Whereas in the US, its relatively more democratic and federated structure creates multiple nodes of authority that serve to fragment the focus of various mobilisations and demands by the public, while electoral alternation between two parties that programmatically differ much less from each other than is the case between main contenders in other liberal democracies, also serves to defuse periodic challenges from below.

Finally, the US is the purest capitalist country in the world and therefore not only are its distinctive managerial and accounting procedures so modular and transportable to other countries; but that this very much also characterises its output of the most modern forms of mass culture—music, dance, films, TV shows, sports, internet freedom and social media platforms (Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp are all headquartered in the US), etc. All this helps to disproportionately shape the values and aspirations of the public of other countries. Where Chinese exceptionalism belongs to the past as do the exceptionalisms of Russia, India and Europe. American exceptionalism, as has been pointed out by a number of scholars, is distinctive in not being rooted in a long historical past but rather in being expressive of a future “promise of modernity.” This is what makes its exceptional character both unique and imitable. This gives the US a cultural-emotional magnetism of sorts which other countries and cultures do not have to anywhere near the same degree. This on its own does not exercise any decisive pull, but it is an enduring advantage that other countries or centres of power do not possess.

China will not replace the US as the world’s number one, nor (irrespective of how strong its ties with Russia are) will it ever establish an alliance structure that can match the range and depth of that held by its US rival. Since this is the case what can it do? Here, there is an interesting irony at work. Its numerous South East Asian neighbours do not fear land invasions nor military assaults or military blackmail from China, while their economies are more deeply tied into China than with the West or US. But because of the general asymmetry of size and power between China and themselves individually or collectively (for example, ASEAN), they are quite happy to have the nearby presence of the US to serve as a counterweight. This need is given credence by China’s behaviour in the East and South China Seas, even though this is strongly motivated by the US presence and ambitions (Bello 2019).

The US has deliberately reinforced its military presence in the “first island chain” stretching from South Korea through Japan down to Okinawa, Taiwan (effectively a US protectorate) and the Philippines. There is also the second and third island chains organised by the US to ensure its command of the whole of the Pacific region and it will maintain this posture not for fear of any potential threat to its mainland from any conventional force but because it believes that it must always remain the only world power. It is to defend itself as best as it can that China has sought to build a naval cordon sanitaire vis-à-vis the US deployments in the first island chain. This does not, of course, justify its unilateral reclamations of islands close to and claimed by the Philippines or in the Spratly Islands or its much wider claims as embodied in the Nine-Dash Line which pre-Communist China also claimed, as does the present Taiwanese government. But even though China’s behaviour is best understood as a form of its overall “strategic defensive” posture, it is rightly criticised. However, the US military and geopolitical arrogance is widely if not completely ignored by others. Matters are only made worse for the region and for humanity at large by the iniquities of the

UNCLOS—its legal sanctification of shameful territorial biases towards the US and its Western and Japanese allies as well as its promotion of the further privatisation of what should be the common heritage of human kind. [1]

Alternatives before China

Beijing is caught in something of a bind. How should it try and counter US pressure? Deng Xiaoping's approach (after the failure of his attack on Vietnam in 1979) was generally to keep a low profile externally and concentrate on further modernisation and domestic development. Under his successors, especially Xi Jinping, a more assertive nationalism has been on display. China being a great power and civilisation for so long in the past should fulfil its destiny and be recognised by neighbours and others as a great Asian Power and a major player with a key role to play in shaping the region not just for its own benefit but for all others as well. This locks China into simply trying to accumulate more and more economic and military strength to better balance the US and perhaps even outflank it somewhat through the BRI creating mutually beneficial trade, production and investment ties with its European allies, otherwise in US-led NATO. But this approach does nothing to weaken the US presence in East Asia and the Pacific nor does it assuage South East Asian concerns about a rising China.

The alternative would be to try and make moves towards promoting an alternative "Asian Security System" which relies on Asian powers to the relative exclusion of the US and its actions. There has been a tentative effort in this direction when in September 2015, Xi indicated publicly his willingness to endorse a collective ASEAN declaration regarding the South China Sea and further, that there would be no militarisation of the islands/reefs that China currently controlled. The US only strengthened its patrolling in response to this and nothing came out of this brief possible opening (Bello 2019: 81).

Yet some things could bring about a new change of direction if the US and China, respectively, showed a certain flexibility. For the US this would mean agreeing to normalise relations with North Korea and having a peace treaty with it without demanding that this be preceded by full denuclearisation of North Korea. China on its part should accept ASEAN's long-standing offer to move towards a code of conduct to govern maritime behaviour in the South China Sea (Bello 2019). Were this to happen, it would ease the way towards other steps, such as joint agreements to mine the resources of the seas but within limits respecting the need for ecological sustainability. Other collectively beneficial proposals could then emerge, such as the establishment of an Asian Clearing Union based on a regional currency, along the lines of Keynes's Bancor scheme. This would ensure that there would be no prolonged and debilitating imbalances in trade for all the participating countries. Again, however sensible this would be, should it ever become a real possibility, it would be strongly opposed by the US.

The chances of such new thinking and initiatives to emerge are, of course, poor. Much more likely is that we will be immersed in this new era of one super-imperialist power coexisting with a triadic form of major inter-imperialist tensions. But unlike in the older era there will be no eventual victor or loser. Both US relative supremacy and China's uneven rise will be progressively less and less consequential. Even without a World War III (improbable but not impossible), the clear unfolding script is that of an increasingly unmanageable, turbulent and chaotic world order of (i) ecological devastation; (ii) persistent mass poverty and the existence if not exacerbation of obscene levels of inequality of income and wealth; (iii) steady erosion of political-democratic forms of governance; and (iv) the ever present possibility of a nuclear breakout of some sort somewhere, with South Asia being the front runner in this respect.

In Conclusion

Strategic thinking about the future is inescapably speculative. But for it to be somewhat intelligent speculation informed by current realities, the time span for such thinking cannot exceed 20 or so years into the future. What has been presented here is within this time span and is undoubtedly a bleak perspective. Can things turn out very differently and much more positively? Not unless an anti-capitalist breakthrough emerges somewhere to give promise and hope that, across national boundaries, we can recognise our common humanity and collectively organise to overcome the four horsemen of the apocalypse, as it were, that have been detailed in the preceding paragraph.

A systemic change of a new and better kind in the current world order is what we need. But any hope of achieving that will require greater realisation of the limitations and dishonesties of realist thinking (in all its liberal variants) and reaching out for newer ways to shape the needs of the national in accordance with those of the international.

Achin Vanaik

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Economic & Political Weekly

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/48/commentary/world-order.html>

Footnotes

[1] For the critique of UNCLOS, see Vanaik (2020).