China — U.S — Russia
Trilateral Relations under the
Context of International
Configuration in Transition

Report by Feng Shaolei, Director, Centre for
Russian Studies, East China Normal University;
Member of the Valdai Discussion Club Advisory
Board

Valdai Discussion Club
Shanghai, November 25–26, 2010

RIANOVOSTI
Russian News & Information Agency

Council on Foreign and Defense Policy

RUSSIA in GLOBAL AFFAIRS
RUSSIA PROFILE.ORG

themoscownews
China — U.S. — Russia Trilateral Relations

under the Context of International Configuration

Report by Feng Shaolei, Director, Centre for Russian Studies, East China Normal University; Member of the Valdai Discussion Club Advisory Board
China is the largest developing country and the fastest growing economy as well in the past thirty years in the whole world. Russia, unparalleled in its natural resources, has observed the most profound transition in the post-Cold War period. For all the difficulties it has gone through, the U.S is still the unrivalled superpower in the world in many respects. In the Cold War era analysts in international relations were preoccupied with the triangular relations between China, the United States and the former Soviet Union. This sort of trilateral relations can be indeed called a classical case in the history of international relations because never before or after in the human history will this type of trilateral relations be found to have changed the whole history process so dramatically and profoundly. Today, the China-US-Russia relationship despite great changes in its form and content, a critical element in shaping the international architecture in the future, still claims close attention of numerous politicians and academics worldwide, and receives extensive media coverage internationally.
I. Research Methodologies on the Study of Trilateral Relations

Neither “strategic trilateral relations” nor “strategic triangular relations” are recent coinage. Historically, there existed so-called “strategic triangularity” in the Spring and Autumn Period and the ensuing Warring States Period between 770 B.C and 221 B.C in China and in the City States Period in ancient Greece. Some observers in the West claim that the strategic triangularity keeps being a significant phenomenon in the thousand-year-long history of international relations.

1. Categories of Trilateral (or Triangular) Relations

From the perspective of the English language, there isn’t significant difference between “trilateral relations” and “triangular relations”. The author has consulted several world-renowned scholars about the nuance between the two. The answer is that the two terms are too close to differentiate. For the convenience of explanation and in view of the connotation of the two terms in Chinese, the author would, in this paper, refer to the relationship between the
three powers in the Cold War period as a triangular one and their linkage in the
post-Cold War period as being trilateral, mainly because the rivalry between
them prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union more represented a
triangularity, but, since the end of the Cold War, the competition or rivalry
between them has been increasingly accompanied by cooperation and
interdependence.

The categorization of trilateral (or triangular) relations can be seen from at
least the following two perspectives. On the one hand, differences can be seen
between trilateral (triangular) relations on different levels. Globally, people tend
to focus their attention on ties between big powers, such as trilateral relations
between Europe, the U.S. and Russia, or those between China, the U.S. and
Russia, or those between Europe, the U.S. and China. In the overlap between
global and regional levels, there are relations between China, the U.S. and Japan
and relations between Russia, the U.S. and Japan. Trilateral relations tend to be
more complicated on the regional level. Take the Iraqi War in the post-Cold War
times as an example, there are trilateral relations between the U.S.-U.K.
coalition as one party, the anti-war countries of Germany, France, Russia and
China to certain extent as a second party and other neutral countries as the third
one. There also exist trilateral relations between Sunnite, Shiah and the Kurdish
Faction inside Iraq. From a cross-regional perspective, the trilateral relations
also include those between America, the EU and East Asia, between China, the
EU and Africa, as well as those between Russia, China and India. Admittedly,
trilateral relations on different levels have different connotations.

On the other hand, “trilateral or triangular relationship” as a theoretical
concept presents considerable complexity, which surfaces on different domains.
First of all, some trilateral relations are of one-dimensional structure while
others are of multi-dimensional structure as far as their strategic content is
concerned. For example, the trilateral relations in the Iraqi War tend to focus on one dimension, that is, “pro-war” vs. “anti-war”, while the trilateral relations between China, the U.S. and Russia in the post-Cold War era are rife with a variety of strategic factors ranging from politics, economy to security. Secondly, some trilateral relations have sovereign states as the only participants, such as those between Russia, the U.S. and Japan, while in some others the participants include multi-lateral regional organizations, such as the trilateral relations between the U.S., the EU and East Asia. Finally, different trilateral relations bear different implications for the global structure. Trilateral relations which have the U.S involvement more or less carry global implications, while those without the U.S. playing a role, such as the relations between the EU, Russia and China, which are big powers and the largest regional grouping respectively, mainly impose impacts on Eurasia-wide affairs. However, we can’t neglect the role secondary forces or marginal factors can play when emphasizing the role played by those leading forces in the world order. During its heyday in the Cold War phase, the Non-Aligned Movement posed serious challenges to the great powers; and the 9.11 incident showed how forces outside the global system can disrupt the foundation of the international system.

2. A Comparison between the Old Trilateral Relationship and the New One

Trilateral (triangular) relations in the Cold War days were different from those in the post-Cold War period. Jan Hallenberg and Hakan Karlsson, authors of the book *Changing Transatlantic Security Relations*, provided their observations on the differences of the trilateral relations during and after the Cold War as follows: First, the old triangular relations between China, the U.S
and Russia were on the global level, while the new triangular relations in the Post-Cold War years mainly operate on the secondary level in world politics. Secondly, who was the “player” was not a problem in the old mode of triangular relations and the three players acknowledged each other’s validity. In the new trilateral relations, however, the term “player” has become problematic. For instance, to what extent is “European Union” an independent player? Thirdly, the status of each party in the old triangular relations was decided, to a large degree, by their strength, so the members of the triangular relations invariably owned large arsenals of weaponry, especially of nuclear weapons. In the new trilateral relations, military power, though still weighty, has lost its dominant position it used to have in the Cold-War era. The role of economic ties in contemporary security relations can clearly be felt in the new trilateral relations. Such issues as environmental protection and global climate change are included in the agenda of the meetings between senior leaders and become important factors in diplomacy. Military power can only exercise its due influence in parallel with other elements such as “strategic control” and “crisis management”. Fourthly, compared with the old triangular relationship, the new one is, to a larger extent, asymmetrical. Unlike what it was during the Cold War when the gap of strength or power between the U.S. and Russia was much narrower, the U.S. today not only enjoys absolute strategic advantages, but also boasts of the largest economy in the world and a comparatively advantageous domestic political system. In the case of the present trilateral relations between China, the U.S. and Russia, it is evident that the U.S. and Russia are weightier and have a bigger say in military terms over a considerable long time, while in economic activities the relationship between the U.S and China is far more significant. This indicates that different powers have different roles to play in different domains.

Viewed from the previously illustrated perspective, triangular relations
during and after the Cold War exhibited different features in terms of scope of influence, the identity of players in the relations and the domestic structures of players in trilateral relations. Additionally, the author argues that the changes of the world political philosophy also have an impact on the relationship between great powers in and after the Cold War. For example, the relations between them in the Cold War period were generally more about territorial expansion or zero-sum games. The termination of the Cold War, nonetheless, has ushered in a new relationship which features, more or less, the coexistence of cooperation and competition, with the absence of deadly fight between the players. Certainly, as a triangular relationship, it still needs the third party to influence the second one or vice versa. However, so far an important phenomenon appears that any party of the triangular relations shows its respect to the core security interests of the other two.

3. Implications of the Study on the Trilateral (Triangular) Relations between China, the U.S. and Russia

The study of the trilateral (triangular) relationship between the three powers in the Cold War phase is of tremendous significance in that it was unprecedented in its impacts worldwide, hence the continuity of strong academic interest in it. Equally important is the post-Cold War trilateral relationship between them for the simple and obvious reason that the three countries are the most influential players in different areas in the world and their trilateral relations certainly have lasting effect on international affairs and world structure. One noticeable phenomenon is that almost all major theoretical contributions in the post-Cold War global politics, including “The End of History”, “Clashes of Civilizations” and “New Cold-War Theory”, are closely tied to the present day trilateral...
relations between the three nations. In other words, all important theoretical doctrines which have world-wide implications in the post-Cold War period can be found or exemplified in the complicated process of the trilateral relations between them. Accordingly, a sound and successful interpretation of their trilateral relations is a key to having a thorough understanding and knowledge of those complicated theoretical doctrines.
II. The Trilateral Relations through Different Eyes

It is the author’s choice to deal with the trilateral relations on the basis of the perceptions of the three powers on each other in this section. Perceptions on international relations, in effect, undergo a process of construction, which depends on past experiences as well as interactive judgments on the future of the world community. To put it plainly, the process of perception is subject to continuous discussions and communications, to corrections and consolidation before it is widely accepted.

The different viewpoints of Russian, Western and Chinese scholars are to be introduced in the following to depict a full picture for the readership.

1. Russian Scholars’ Views

It is noteworthy that Russian scholars are generally positive towards the China-U.S-Russia trilateral relationship and its future development. Although they may differ in their points of views, the majority claim that China and Russia should enhance their collaboration. Another group is of the opinion that Russia should develop collaboration and even strategic alliance with the West while
maintaining its cooperative ties with China. The third group advocates a strengthened tie with the West.

Let’s look at the first point of view which advocates that Russia and China should further their cooperation given their similar experience, their capacity to complement each other in geo-politics and economic development, and their shared attitudes towards current global issues. Scholars of this viewpoint believe that this trend is underscored by the development of the post-Cold War China-Russia relations, which include the resolution of territorial dispute, the process of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, their bilateral trade growth, and the close interaction between the senior leaders of the two countries. This trend is also manifested in President Medvedev’s remarks when he answered this author’s questions at the press conference of Valdai Club in September, 2008, in which he said that: 1. As a Eurasian country, Russia thinks it in line with its economic strategy in the East to develop ties with China and other Asia-Pacific countries; 2. Russia can meet the demands for energy from both Asia and Europe, and Russia fully appreciates the market opportunities in both Asia and other Asia-Pacific countries; 3. The strengthened cultural ties between Russia and China, which benefit their bilateral relations, result from accumulative efforts of both sides over the past years.¹

Scholars of this view are poignantly critical of the western media reports which made an issue of so-called threat posed by China to Russia. In the case of Siberia and Far East, the Russian scholars made a cogent point in proving that the growing population of China can be accommodated in the vast territory of its own including North-east China, and therefore it is not necessary for China to export its population to Russia. China’s export-orientated business is seen as being economically driven and having nothing to do with overseas expansion. Therefore, it is both necessary and possible for Russia to further the existing
Sino-Russian strategic cooperation to successfully deal with challenges and pressure.²

Yevgeny Bazhanov, a famous Russian expert in Chinese issues, holds that there used to exist some attempts for “two against one” to deal with triangular relations, for example, China-Russia alliance against the U.S. during the Cold War which did not succeed and the West tried to win over Russia to suppress China after the collapse of the Soviet Union which failed again. Currently, some American scholars put forward that Moscow and Washington should cooperate closely to fight against China’s economic and political development. However, Russia does not want to isolate itself from China, but instead would rather cooperate with than balance China. Nor does Russia want to be against China, because the goal of Russia is to realize its modernization, which needs to solve too many domestic problems. This means that there did not exist a long-term U.S.-Russia alliance against China, nor will there be a long-term China-Russia alliance against the U.S. The China-U.S.-Russia triangular is doomed to be three separate centers in the long run³.

The viewpoint which lays more emphasis on cooperation with the West is represented by Igor Zevelev and Mikhail Troitskiy in their article “Russia and China in the Mirror of U.S. Policies” published in November, 2007 in Russia in Global Affairs, an academic journal for international studies in Russia. One view they hold is that there are a number of mechanisms facilitating Russia’s interaction with the West, which include G-8 Summit, joint meetings with the NATO and the EU, and the cooperation with Council of Europe (COE) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Russian involvement in these organizations will improve the mutual understanding between Russia and western countries, help Russia learn how to use and implement international mechanisms, and promote Russian cooperation with
the West in stabilizing situations in the Middle East, Central Asia and other troubled areas. It is in the interest of Russia to strengthen its cooperation with the West when it is still in the process of resuming its power. Their second view is that the best way for Russia is to learn from China’s experience without stopping developing a closer partnership with the West. Russia is better conditioned than China in working with the West, although the Chinese performance is more successful at present. The choice for Russia is to find a position between the Chinese model and that of America’s “lesser partners” which depend on the U.S. for security. 4

The third attitude is poised between the previous two which is characterized by an even approach towards both China and the West. Mr. Edward Lozinsky is a representative of this idea, who elaborated his opinion in his recent book titled *Russia between the U.S. and China*. While highlighting the necessity and practicability of maintaining a stable relationship with China, Mr. Lozinsky doesn’t abandon the possibility of partnering and even aligning with the U.S. by stating that: 1. In the context of globalization, Russia has experienced a period of close relationship with the West since 9.11. There was a time when Russia was serious about allowing the western entrance into Central Asia, which was unimaginable in the days of the Cold War. However, since the Color Revolution backed by the U.S, Russia was concerned that this approach towards the West might come to nothing or even jeopardize itself. Roughly at the same time Washington began to regard Russia as a potential threat and sought to contain Russia by NATO’s expansion. In this context, Russia began to shift its emphasis eastward. Against the backdrop of Russia’s cooling relationships with both the U.S and the EU, Moscow is expected to move between the East and the West. 2. Lozinsky’s view of the trilateral relations can be summarized as follows: While maintaining a friendly relationship with China, Russia should have an important
country to counterbalance the influence of China. And this country, which is no less weighty than China, should expect Russia to be completely independent of China. Clearly, this role can be played by none but the United States. 3. Lozinsky claims that it is highly probable that Russia would further promote its relations with China principally because China will not become an occidental country. Nonetheless, it will not be in Russian interest if serious conflicts arise between China and the U.S and Russia is forced to make a choice between the two powers. Consequently, the future of the strategic partnership between Russia and China is dependent on how the new China-Russia-U.S trilateral relations will proceed and whether the three powers can resolve the issues between them in a peaceful means.5

To summarize, on one hand, the three viewpoints show that the positive interaction of the three powers is a central concern of the Russian academia. They attach special importance to the relations with China. And of particular importance are the firm stand of Russian leaders for a closer relationship with China and the plea from the public for more contacts with China, both of which impose positive impacts on the media coverage of China and the decision-making process concerning the relations with China.

This does not necessarily mean there are no problems between China and Russia, but indicates that all these issues did not change the overall trend of Russia to cooperate with China stably and lastingly. This is not bad news for the United States as the third party actually.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy of Russian scholar Mr. Vasily Mikheyev’s research report accomplished in 2009 entitled Russia-China-U.S. Triangular Relationship in the Asian-Pacific Region. In this report, the authors give a comprehensive analysis on the Russia-U.S.-China triangular relationship around the theme whether the third party influences in each group of bilateral relations,
then draw the conclusion that any group of bilateral relations in the trilateral relations does not need a third party, in particular, under the context of not completely getting rid of Cold War mentality but with non-confrontational national interests. Mr. Vasily Mikheev and other authors propose that the most basic approach to handle this situation is not to take the third party as a card in competition with the other as a compromise, especially in possibly developing trilateral common interests, such as anti-terrorism and the North Korean issue; but a more progressive approach is to create a new coordinated world view in order to understand the interests of each country or state under the background of globalization which will enable to realize the future world peace. This report provides detailed, objective analysis and pragmatic approaches which are quite helpful for the in-depth thinking in this paper.

2. Western Scholars’ Views

There have been controversies and differences among western scholars in their views and stands towards the trilateral relations between China, the U.S. and Russia.

(1) Some western scholars are hostile to the closeness between China and Russia and those opposed to both China and Russia in ideology and security matters are still rather influential. “The Return of History and the End of Dreams”, a long essay written by Robert Kagan, a major representative of the neo-conservatism, gives an exemplary and systematic description of the new conservative stand.6

First, in his long essay Robert Kagan claims, in an arbitrary manner, that both China and Russia are “hostile towards America.” He thinks that China and Russia certainly share a common and explicit goal of restraining American
hegemony, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a good example for that. Secondly, by stating that the ideological struggle has resurrected, the competition between liberalism and autocracy is going on, and that the nations in the world will continue to be divided over ideologies, he is actually putting his observations on the basis of ideologies. Robert Kagan concludes that “the rise of Russia and China will help autocracy permeate into some regions in the world”. He is even critical of the late 1990s’ Clinton Administration by saying that its policy of imposing political impacts on China by trade liberalization was a mistake. The implication is that pressure shall be applied to China in both political and economic means in order to bring China to terms. Thirdly, Robert Kagan sticks to the Cold War mentality in interpreting the post-Cold War trilateral relations between China, the U.S. and Russia in that he puts emphasis on the antagonistic prospect between China, Russia as one party and the U.S. as the other. When Russia launched counterattacks on Georgian troops in South Ossetia on August 8, the same day when the Beijing Olympic Games opened, Robert Kagan further asserted that it was a cooperative declaration of the authoritative system.

(2) If Robert Kagan wants to prove the correctness of neo-conservatism by picturing such a dire prospect, the more popular view in the United States indicates that the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relationship is paving the way for a closer tie between Beijing and Moscow. This view is better represented by Christopher Marsh, Director of Asian Studies at Baylor University in America. In his article “Russia Plays the China Card” contributed to National Interest, Mr. Marsh presents the following core ideas: First, the fundamental difference of interests between the U.S and Russia in East Europe and Central Asia discontinued the post-Cold War short-lived honey-moon in the U.S.-Russia relationship and led to their mutual indifference. At the same time, the
complexity of Sino-American relationship continued due to U.S. military expansion worldwide and the issue of Taiwan. Against this background China and Russia have been getting closer to each other in an exceptional way, indicating clearly that it is the frictions between the U.S. and Russia that have cleared the way for the rapid warming-up of Sino-Russian dyad.

Secondly, for Christopher Marsh, even though China and Russia view each other as a counterweight to the U.S., it is not their intention to form an anti-U.S. alliance. It is to the benefit of China to see a stronger and diplomatically more independent Russia, which assumes a pragmatic role and keeps a distance from the U.S. Despite the Russian concern over the rise of China and the Russian place in the international arena being possibly replaced by Beijing, Moscow shows more enthusiasm than other big powers to cooperate with China. At present, both China and Russia see the U.S. as the biggest threat to their security.

Thirdly, Mr. Marsh sees the similarity between the current China-Russia relationship and the U.S.-UK relations after the end of the Second World War. Expecting to prove its global worth and importance by involving itself in such issues as Kosovo crisis and Korean nuclear deadlock, Russia is like post-World War Two Great Britain whose strength is on the decline. While being more like the rising America after the World War Two, and having stopped calling Russia “big brother” decades ago, China doesn’t consider itself a big brother either and hopes to get along with Russia on the basis of equality. Additionally, neither China nor Russia has territorial ambition in Central Asia.

Fourthly, in view of the inevitability of Russia and China rising to become great powers, Marsh warns that the U.S. should reorient its policy towards these two countries. If the relationship between the U.S. and these two states continues to deteriorate, the “misplaced American policy may push Moscow and
Beijing to align, thus causing more serious consequences than China's post-1949 ‘leaning to one-side’ policy did.”

(3) The third point of view of western academics are relatively pragmatic and discreet, predicting a multi-directional future of the trilateral relations. It is especially so with the younger generations of experts and scholars in western think tanks and relevant authorities. Enjoying close relations with top government officials, having work experience in their own countries’ decision-making bodies or in the countries under study, and having had a sound professional training and knowledge of the countries concerned, these professionals more often than not produce pragmatic and objective findings, which can provide more direct service to the policymaking in foreign affairs in western countries.

Andrew Kuchins, an expert on Russian studies in the West, used to be the chief of the Moscow office of Carnegie Foundation. Having much experience in Russian affairs, he believes that although Sino-Russian tie is said to be at its best, it is, both economically and strategically, focused on solving each party’s own problems, and applicable to regional and global issues only to a certain extent. Nonetheless, from a strategic perspective, the cooperation between China and Russia does have a direct impact on the U.S. Once the cooperation on arms sales between Russia and China and the UN is achieved, the U.S. will be more or less affected; if the U.S. plans to take military actions against Iran, it can foresee objection from both China and Russia; and the U.S. efforts for intervention in the former Soviet Union areas by the means of democracy and human rights will only result in inducing closer cooperation between China and Russia. Kuchins is different from many other western scholars in that he doesn’t see China-Russia alliance as a major prospect, but reiterates that their cooperation is to solve each nation’s own problems, without posing serious threat to the U.S. For Kuchins, in
historical, cultural, geographical and economic terms, Russia is closer to the West than China. Only upon particularly significant incidents taking place will Russia possibly deviate from its post-Cold War policy of cooperating with the West.

Bobo Lo, another emerging expert on Russian studies in Europe, shares similar views with Kuchins on the trilateral relations between China, Russian and the U.S. In *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and Neogeopolitics*, a book he published recently, Bobo Lo presents his own analyses on the trilateral relations.

Bobo Lo states that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the U.S. becomes the sole super power, Russia turns into a “black hole” and China cautiously but steadily goes out of the shadow of isolation ---such a situation injects new vitality into the trilateral relations. In fact, trilateralism is not what Russia anticipated at the beginning. When China remained silent upon the Soviet disintegration, Russia wanted to “co-rule” the world with the U.S. Washington, however, rejected the Russian request on the grounds that it would incite Russia to strive to regain its super power status. In the fall of 1993, Russia’s efforts to pursue such a goal reemerged, reflected first in a series of new concepts ranging from “common victory” of the Cold War, “balance of geopolitics” to “multi-polar world”. The emergence of these concepts mirrored the shift from “co-existence”, an idea positively understood in the West, to “balance of geopolitics” which was once popular. “Trilateralism” then became a fashion in policymaking, which included the idea of West-East balance and Russia’s bridging role between the West and the East.

Bobo Lo argued that the Russian concepts in the first half of the 1990s basically reflected that Moscow had not changed its Europe-centered stand. It was not until 1996 when Yeltsin appointed Primakov as Premier that
fundamental changes took place. From the Russian perspective, developing relations with China under the framework of trilateralism could help increase Russian strategic flexibility, reduce its dependence on the West, force the West to give more beneficial responses to Russia, and reinforce Russia’s expected bridging role between the West and the East. Equally important, Russia could work in collaboration with China to make concerted efforts in building a “multi-polar” world.

In BoBo Lo’s opinion, Russia’s trilateral approach in the 1990s was generally a failure in that it didn’t achieve the anticipated strategic flexibility and leverage, and failed to gain, in the Asia-Pacific region, the opportunities it had lost in the West. As a consequence, Russia not only failed to become “a bridge connecting the East and the West” or “the defender of European civilization,” but was “marginalized in both the East and the West”.

By indicating an amazingly emerging phenomenon that “trilateralism” was regaining popularity, Bobo Lo rekindled a flame of hope for the restructuring of the world. He believes that the U.S., Russia and China now enjoy an unprecedented equal status. America’s trouble and predicament almost coincided with Russia’s resurrection. Putin was lucky to get hold of such an opportunity, and he proved himself to be able to exploit it. The rise in the energy prices, in tandem with the resurrection of Russia’s economy, enabled Russia to put on a performance on the international arena disregarding the criticism from the West. Sure enough, the rise of China is a more decisive factor. Although China is faced with various problems ranging from resources, energy supplies and environmental protection, it seems destined to rise to be the next super power in the first half of the 21st century.

The core of Bobo Lo’s argument is that geological anarchy is reappearing as a backdrop of the trilateral relations among China, the U.S. and Russia. In solving
the problem of geographical anarchy, China will play a leading role in achieving stability and economic prosperity, thus becoming a substitute for making up America’s shortcomings and limitations. In this sense, China-Russia axis of convenience mirrors the spirit of the time. After all, Sino-Russian relations are normal bilateral relations, which are operated at the same time under multi-lateral and trilateral framework.⁹

Although such concept as neo-conservatism is far from extinct, and is even exercising some impact in America, it is surpassed by voices proposing that the international order be maintained by the interaction of the three powers and benefits be maximized. Moreover, it is believed that more scenarios exist for the future of the trilateral relations and the final choice depends on the interaction of each party’s internal and external policies and the interplay between nations as well.

3. The Chinese Studies of the Trilateral Relations

Chinese scholars have much historic wisdom to turn to in studying trilateral relations. But how to apply their ancestor’s outstanding wisdom in dealing with trilateral relations in the modern times still poses a challenge to the Chinese academics. After the 9.11 incident at the beginning of the century, Chinese scholars held quite an interesting discussion on the future of the trilateral ties. Professor Su Ge put forward the idea that, after the Cold War, relations among China, the U.S. and Russia underwent changes and the traditional “triangular relations” no longer applied in viewing the three nations. With the arrival of the new century, we should “advance with the times”, make efforts to promote the Sino-American and Sino-Russian bilateral relations in parallel, so as to promote the world peace and development.¹⁰ However, some scholars held
somewhat cautious viewpoints. After 9.11, for instance, Shi Xiaohui believed that Russia went on the track of cooperating with and integrating into the West after more than a decade of trial and wandering, so U.S.-Russian relations entered a new stage. Facing the most profound changes in the international community after the end of the Cold War, much attention should be paid to such issues as how to define the “triangular relations” between China, the U.S. and Russia in the new era, and whether the improvement of U.S.-Russian relations would bring negative impacts on Sino-Russian and Sino-American relations.\textsuperscript{11} Guo Zhenyuan and other scholars believed that although 9.11 brought about substantial changes to the trilateral relations, it did not alter the development of the relations after the Cold War. Cooperation, accompanied with competition, in the relations was increasingly evident and China’s position in the trilateral relations had improved.\textsuperscript{12} As noted by Yang Jiemian in his article entitled “China-U.S.-Russia Trilateral Relation and its Characteristics” \textsuperscript{13} which proposes that the financial crisis has provided new opportunities for the development of China-U.S.-Russia trilateral relations, while the three parties have also promoted further development of multilateral affairs by means of active cooperation at all levels including global, regional, sub-regional levels. Although any group of bilateral relations among the triangular relations has their own special concerns and the function and mechanism of coordination of the trilateral relations are not so mature, still the triangular relations will develop further without doubt. The discussions indicated that Chinese scholars fully realized that the trilateral relations were a major issue influencing, in a long term, both international configuration and China’s foreign policy.
4. The Asymmetrical Trilateral Relations: Between Cognition and Reality

First, progress has been made in the mutual understanding of the trilateral relations since the end of the Cold War—transcendence over the traditional ideology, high alertness to the rivalry of group politics, intense concern over the sustainability of the post-Cold War world peace—all of these represent that, although the international community is confronted with the transitional period in power configuration and the interpretations of history and the opinions about the future are various, given the continuity of the U.S.’s relative dominance over international affairs, and also due to maintained cooperation and coordination of emerging economies, the relative stability of the international community will not experience an ultimate reverse in the foreseeable future. Generally speaking, compared with the U.S, it still remains vulnerable.

Second, the other side of the issue is that the U.S. doesn’t enjoy the status as the sole super power as it did at the end of the Cold War. The war in Iraq and in Afghanistan has dragged the U.S. into a difficult place. The U.S. has also suffered major trauma institutionally, morally and economically during the financial crisis, but this trend of real power configuration has not been fully reflected in the international configuration. Although China and Russia have faced various challenges as well during the financial crisis, however, as far as the development trend is concerned, the rising China and gradually recovering Russia further catalyses the shift of the world architecture.

Third, the approaching of Russia and China towards each other since the mid-1990s resulted from the profound change in post Cold War geopolitics, which was, in clearer terms, the pressure from the West and the strengthened alliance network headed by the U.S. in the East. This geographical pressure
brought Russia and China under similar challenges. In the West, the NATO, EU’s east-ward expansion, Color Revolution, the deployment of antimissile system in Central and East European countries are all concerns to Russia, America’s old rival in the Cold War; while in the East, the U.S. strengthened its traditional alliance relations with some Asia-Pacific nations as a counterweight and hedging measure designed at China. Although the Chinese way of dealing with the U.S. and its allies seems more flexible than the confrontational competition between Russia and the West, in essence Russia and China are facing almost the same level of geographical pressure. On the whole, the progress in economic cooperation and the geopolitical pressure has shown a contrast.

Fourth, the domestic system of China and Russia again displays closeness and similarity. This phenomenon, exaggerated by neoconservatives as “re-alliance of autocracy”, is actually the efforts of the two nations to fulfill the goal of marketization and democratization under the strong and powerful administrative force and on the basis of their domestic circumstances. For Chinese and Russian reformers, promoting democracy and deepening market reforms has always been their long-term goals. Western media’s perceptions and the actual situation both in China and Russia are not so balanced.

Fifth, structurally speaking, the trilateral relations are now in a relatively asymmetrical and dynamic process.

Viewed from an economic perspective, Sino-American relations significantly outweigh the Russian-American relations. There has even appeared widespread anticipation that China can work together with the U.S. to push forward the world economy. In terms of energy cooperation, Russia and America placed much emphasis on their complementary relations a couple of years ago. However, while Russian-American energy cooperation failed to progress much in recent
years, Sino-Russian cooperation in this respect has gained momentum. It can be rightly argued that, by developing close economic linkages with both powers, China proves to be the most active among the three nations in the area of economic relations.

Strategically speaking, Russia boasts stronger ties with America than China does. It is natural that the two nations possessing the biggest nuclear arsenals in the world put high priority on strategic cooperation after the termination of the Cold War. The recent "resetting" of U.S.-Russia relations, particularly with the treaty of reduction in strategic offensive weapons, has indicated the willingness of the two sides in improving their relations, however, it still takes time to test how far the U.S.-Russia strategic cooperation can go.

Viewed from the international organizations which these three parties belong to, in general, America still occupies an irreplaceable position in international organizations, yet it has been increasingly challenged, while China-Russia cooperation in the U.N., G20 and the BRICs has been expanded and strengthened.

One noticeable aspect of the trilateral relations is that the imbalance of powers among China, the U.S. and Russia in international organizations does not mean that these three parties can not cooperate with each other at all, for example, the recently adopted United Nations resolution on Iran is a proof. Despite Russia’s still dominant influence in Central Asia, although the U.S. still intervened both strategically and economically in Central Asia, however, after the Kyrgyzstan incident both Russia and the U.S. has shown caution in Central Asia issues which indicates the stability generated by the development of multilateral relations. When we make comparisons between China and Russia, we find one more relatively asymmetrical phenomenon. Russia is now a G8 member and has developed institutional work relations with the NATO, the only
international security organization, but it is not a member of the WTO. China, however, has not established any official relations with the NATO and is not a member of the G8 group, though it succeeded in entering the WTO a few years ago. That is to say each lacks what the other has.

Culturally speaking, although Russia and the U.S. both belong to the Christian world, the difference between Eastern Orthodox and the Christianity in the West brings about disparities in various areas from public culture to ideology. In the contrast, China enjoys a long history of cultural exchanges with both nations, its understanding of them is comparable to, on some occasions surpasses, their understanding of China. China, therefore, has its advantages in the trilateral cultural exchanges.

Sixth, concerning the measures to deal with the asymmetrical trilateral relations, one vantage point sticks to the traditional “balance of power strategy”, which places emphasis on achieving balance and maximizing national interests in the context of balance. Nonetheless, Bobo Lo proposes a more important and positive approach, which lays stress on “tolerance of divergences not merely the strategic balance”. In comparison with the simple strategic balance approach which focuses on the idea of “one thing conquering another”, Bobo Lo’s viewpoint, which stresses understanding differences and advocates mutual tolerance as well as interplay of ideas and interests, might be a way leading to a complete end of the Cold War.

5. The Trilateral Relations and the Sustainability of a Peaceful World Order

With several possible scenarios in mind the author is prone to be cautiously positive about the prospect of the international order. The prediction of various
China — U.S. — Russia Trilateral Relations
under the Context of International Configuration

scenarios for the future is based on the fact that the changes in international power structure are a gaming process relatively free from the will of people. Otherwise, the two catastrophic world wars would not have broken out after people had already suffered from war fires long enough. However, human history did enjoy some long term peace and stability, like the “century peace” under the Vienna System in the 19th century. A careful study of this period of history will lead to at least two points to be kept in our minds.

First, after the Vienna System was established, Europe entered an era when classic liberalism, socialism (not the former Soviet Union type), and nationalism entwined and coexisted. And this basically tallies with today’s trilateral relations. In spite of the endless western ideological attacks against China and Russia, these two countries, together with the United States, actually have their respective plans for developing a modern market economy and a democratic legal system most suitable to their respective conditions. With more importance having to be attached to nation states, these three countries are more like in the Westphalia Age than Europe now. Media coverage even exclaimed that the U.S. was “turning towards socialism” when Washington tapped into the national macro fiscal power to deal with the current financial crisis. Ironic as it sounds, it indicates that the use of macroeconomic control at a time of crisis is indeed the responsibility of a government. It is, therefore, reasonable to pursue more common ground between the three nations to encourage co-existence and mutual tolerance, despite their differences.

Second, if the coexistence of the three schools of thoughts was an important prerequisite for the sustained “century peace” in Europe in the 19th century, the power structure under the Vienna System was basically a so-called “Metternich Age” which was characterized by the competition and balancing games between different players based on different schools of thoughts. Although multi-polar
power structure is not yet a reality in today’s international configuration, the world is gradually moving in this direction. If the coexistence of various thoughts and the balance between powers could make the “century peace” a reality in the 19th century Europe, why can’t we work for it today?

The 19th century Europe may differ from today’s world in that the competition for colonization outside Europe then made it possible for European powers to maintain peace and balance of power on the European continent. However, the strong globalization process in today’s world provides an opportunity for the peaceful communication in goods and thoughts among nations and regions. Viewed from this perspective, the peace prospect for us human beings is not without hope. It is needless to say that, having more experience in this regard, China, the United States and Russia should take more responsibilities and make substantial contributions.\[^{14}\]
Notes

1 An address by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in the International Valdai Club, September 13, 2008.


3 “Confused Triangle among Russia, China and America”, Moscow Time, Jul 22, 2010.


7 Luncheon speech delivered by Robert Kagan at a seminar on American foreign policy convened at Virginia University in June, 2007. The author was the only Chinese scholar invited to the seminar.


11 Shi Xiaohui, “Relations between China, the U.S. and Russia in the New Era”, People’s Forum, no. 8, 2002.


13 Russia in Global Affairs, May-Jun 2010, Moscow.
The first draft of this paper was presented at an international conference in Dec 2008 in Macau. The paper presented here is the third draft after completely revision with more contents added and title adjusted as well.