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**“THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM”:  
“DUAL DETERRENCE” IN THE U.S. POLICY  
AND STRATEGIC STABILITY**

*Konstantin V. BOGDANOV,  
ORCID 0000-0002-5922-0791, cbogdanov@imemo.ru  
Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations,  
Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), 23, Profsoyuznaya Str., Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation.*

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**Abstract.** The formation of a geopolitical triangle between the U.S., PRC and Russia is becoming the main driving factor shaping the strategic landscape. This raises several key questions for researchers. It is necessary to clarify the peculiarities of the “tripolar” world order from the military-strategic point of view and identify innovations it brings to the existing methodological corpus of studying and maintaining strategic stability. The dynamics of contradictions in this system is complex, characterized by multiple variants of transformation into a more or less stable system, which will form the basis of the emerging multilateral world order. The three main players can enter into different relationship models and change them as the situation evolves. The military-strategic dimension of trilateral interaction has already significantly changed views on the operating factors and the essence of strategic stability compared to the way it was understood at the end of the Cold War. The situation is seen as far less stable than in the bipolar model of confrontation which was realized during the Cold War. It is necessary to rebuild the system of risk reduction measures, including declarative ones. However, it seems clear that such a process could only develop sustainably in parallel with a broadbased process of international political détente. This will require all parties to the process to manage the acute phase of the crisis around Ukraine, creating grounds for revising the foundation of strategic relations in Europe following the principles of equal and indivisible security. At the same time, a comprehensive regional security system in the Indo-Pacific will be needed that can effectively address the most pressing issues of U.S. — China contest there. Despite the fact that relations in the triangle are currently in an acute phase of confrontation, conclusions should already be drawn about the practical forms of realizing the notions of strategic stability through arms control measures.

**Keywords:** arms control, international security, deterrence, strategic stability, tripolar world order, escalation.

**About author:**

Konstantin V. BOGDANOV, Cand. Sci. (Technical), Senior Researcher, Center for International Security.

**“ЗАДАЧА ТРЕХ ТЕЛ”:  
“ДВОЙНОЕ СДЕРЖИВАНИЕ” В ПОЛИТИКЕ США  
И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКАЯ СТАБИЛЬНОСТЬ**

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*БОГДАНОВ Константин Вадимович, кандидат технических наук,  
ORCID 0000-0002-5922-0791, cbogdanov@imemo.ru  
ИМЭМО им. Е.М. Примакова РАН, РФ, 117997 Москва, ул. Профсоюзная, 23.*

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**Аннотация.** Формирование геополитического треугольника из США, КНР и России становится основным движущим фактором, образующим стратегический ландшафт. Динамика противоречий в этой системе носит сложный характер, обуславливается множественными вариантами трансформации в более-менее устойчивую систему, которая ляжет в основу возникающего многостороннего миропорядка. Военно-стратегическое измерение трехстороннего взаимодействия уже существенно изменило взгляды на действующие факторы и сущность стратегической стабильности. Несмотря на то что отношения в треугольнике на данный момент находятся в острой фазе противостояния, уже сейчас следует делать выводы о практических формах реализации представлений о стратегической стабильности через меры контроля над вооружениями.

**Ключевые слова:** контроль над вооружениями, международная безопасность, сдерживание, стратегическая стабильность, триполярный миропорядок, эскалация.

## INTRODUCTION

“I’m not sure what strategic stability looks like in a three-party world... There are many passively stable two-body orbital regimes that you can stick stuff in, but there are exactly zero passively stable three-body orbital regimes.” These words were spoken by Admiral Charles Richards, Commander of the United States Strategic Command, at the Space and Missile Defense Symposium on 11 August 2022 [source 1]. The emotional metaphoricality of his statement reflects the urgency of the analytical problem. For the first time in history, the strategic stability intended to evolve out of the bipolar landscape, well mastered by the end of the Cold War, into a “tripolar” landscape shaped by the United States, Russia, and China. For this purpose, it is necessary, at the very least, to pose a few clarifying questions. What are the features of the “tripolar” world order from the strategic military point of view? What innovations does it introduce to the existing methodological corpus for investigating and maintaining strategic stability? Which elements from previous stages of deterrence policy and arms control are still relevant? How can we move forward, given the increasing tensions in international relations at the present time?

### “GEOPOLITICAL TRIPLEX”: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL MODEL

The sanctions-induced technological wars and armed conflicts of the late 2010s and early 2020s have ultimately exposed and brought to the fore a systematic phenomenon in international security — the formation of a “geopolitical triplex”, the cornerstone of the global military and strategic relations between the USA, China and the Russian Federation. The paradoxical trajectory of the post-Cold War world order highlights the asymmetries and dynamic instability of transitional structures, moving from a clearly delineated, institutionalised bipolarity<sup>1</sup> to a “unipolar

<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s–1980s, this structure seemed immutable not only to a layman but also to professional international experts. In particular, one of the biggest forecasting errors of the neorealist school (specifically of K. Waltz [1]) which is still recalled to this day was the assertion of extremely high sustainability and duration of bipolar systems in international

moment” and further to a “multipolar world” — in this case, a tripolar one.

“Strategic triangles” as a more or less speculative geopolitical abstraction have been a feature of international relations for quite some time (for example in forms borrowed from the toolkit of sociology [2]). However, a serious, practice-oriented impetus to explore them emerged only in the early 1970s [3, 4, 5, pp. 228–264], when China’s “adventurers and schismatics” were at a low point in their relations with “revisionists” from the Soviet Union. The US “imperialists”, observing this situation, sought to exploit the split within the communist camp by focusing on normalising relations with Beijing. This strategy is usually associated with the names of R. Nixon and H. Kissinger [6]. Such a structure, featuring two foreign policy approaches rather than a singular policy aimed at comprehensive “containment” or “rollback” of world communism necessitated the development of the ideological and theoretical basis<sup>2</sup>.

The theoretical models of that period revealed a much richer set of relationship types in the “triplex”, compared to the bipolar system. For instance, Dittmer distinguished three such models [7, p. 489], aside from a scenario of a war of all against all. One model had a symmetrical structure: “*menage a trois*” where all three actors maintain good relations. The other two models were asymmetrical: a “*romantic triangle*” in which one actor maintains good relations with both of the actors who were in conflict with each other, and a “*stable marriage*”, where two actors formed an alliance against the third. In this framework, Dittmer described the dynamics of USA — USSR — PRC relations as the transition from the “stable marriage” of communists against the USA to the “romantic triangle”. In this triangle, according to contemporary notes by T. Graham, the USA was engaged in a delicate balancing act between the two other powers, which were in

relations compared with single-component and multidimensional models.

<sup>2</sup> A somewhat similar strategy of “selective partnership”, in turn, associated with the names of B. Yeltsin and E. Primakov, was implemented since the mid-1990s by Russia manoeuvring between the two centres of the emerging global world — the United States and China.

irreconcilable antagonism. Washington skillfully exploited the fears of both sides, playing on their concerns about whether the USA was preparing to ally with one against the other [6, p. 64].

The thesis pointing to the abyss of Soviet-Chinese antagonism, characteristic of American expertise of the 1970s and 1980s, is questioned by some Russian experts on China who present a much more complex and multidimensional nature of dynamics in Soviet-Chinese relations during that period [8]. This perspective is also reflected in later works by foreign experts [9, 10], including Dittmer’s research [11, pp. 207-223], where elements of problematization are observed. In particular, Bobo critically revised the “triangles” theory, pointing out that triplex structures emerge only when the military and foreign policy capabilities of all three participants are relatively equal (a thesis that will serve as one of the pivotal points in this review). In his opinion, as of 2010 such structures did not exist globally, and a further transition to either bipolarity or multilateralism seemed more likely [12, p. 32]. Criticism of “polygonal” systems has often been framed within a broader perspective of historical problematization of the very principle of balance of power, pointing to the unstable nature of power accumulation cumulative mechanisms, leading not to stable equilibrium but to the eventual establishment of hegemony. This should be considered as a continuation of the intellectual basis of the “unipolar moment” theory [13]. It has also been frequently emphasised that the shifting teams within US administrations have not yet been prepared to fully embrace the “triplex” concept in practical geopolitics [6, pp. 66-67].

The current “triplex” state has an ambivalent character and can potentially evolve towards a “stable marriage” of Russia and China against the United States (if no normalisation of the confrontation between the two countries and the West is achieved) or towards a “romantic triangle” with China and, in some cases, Russia taking the lead. In the latter case, the possible duality in relations with the United States could lay the groundwork for future conflicts, this time between Moscow and Beijing, due to “strategic jealousy” in their competition for Washington’s attention.

The strategic military aspects of the three-actor system, as they were perceived at the turn of the 2000s-2010s, were explored in detail in the work by Arbatov and Dvorkin [14]. Their work highlighted the non-equilibrium nature of deterrence among the three dyads forming the triangle at that time: the parity and strategic stability between Russia and the USA, the asymmetric deterrence of the United States by China, and the “latent” deterrence potentially existing between Russia and China. As Khudaikulova noted, “the strategic triangle is characterised by strategic military security interdependence of each of the three parties, as concerns the relations with the other two actors” [15, p. 56]. Indeed, at the moment the USA — China — Russia “triplex” is increasingly acquiring a strategic military dimension because of the sharp escalation of relations between Moscow and Washington over the Ukrainian crisis alongside Beijing’s active implementation of strategic arms development programs.

#### ON THE VERGE OF “DUAL DETERRENCE”

The current U.S. strategic planning documents treat the “triplex” ambiguously. Back in 2017, the National Security Strategy under Donald Trump made a qualitatively important step: it announced the commencement of the era of “great powers competition”. However, Washington still viewed the global policy environment as a U.S.-driven unified “order” which was under attack and subject to revision by “revisionist powers” (Russia and China) while also being threatened by “rogue states” (Iran and North Korea) [source 2, p. 25, 26].

It is worth noting that while the Ukrainian crisis has escalated tensions, it has toughened the rhetoric in U.S. documents but has changed very little in terms of their logic and structure. The Biden Administration’s National Security Strategy of October 2022 retained this general stance, though it became more nuanced. In this document, Russia was characterised as posing “an immediate threat to a free and open international system,” and China — as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the inter-

national order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective” [source 3, p. 8]. The terminology was clarified in the National Defense Strategy released immediately after the previous document: China was now referred to as a “*pac-ing challenge*” and Russia as an “*acute threat*” [source 4, p. 4, 5], which gives a different perception of the competitors’ trajectories and capabilities. While Russia is still seen by the U.S. as a “global spoiler” doomed in the long term but creating a lot of problems here and now, they treat China as a full-scale competitor capable of catching up and replacing the hegemon.

However, the Nuclear Posture Review, which is part of the National Defense Strategy, made this significant observation: “By the 2030s the U.S. will, for the first time in its history, face with two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries” [source 5, p. 4].

In October 2023, a major report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture released a major report, compiled by a group of experts headed by M. Creedon, former Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, and Senator J. Kyl [source 6]. The establishment of such a commission is a significant event. In particular, the former U.S. Secretaries of Defense W. Perry and J. Schlesinger were co-chairs of the commission that prepared the previous report in 2009; the co-authors included former CIA Director J. Woolsey and one of the greatest theorists of nuclear deterrence, M. Halperin. One cannot claim that “Rome has spoken” — after all, such a report is strictly advisory in nature and does not set out automatic changes in the military or political course. However, it typically serves a specific purpose: to create a unified understanding of the strategic landscape within the establishment and to identify key challenges along with potential solutions.

The report quite bluntly states that the main challenge is simultaneous forceful counteraction to “Russian aggression in Europe and Chinese aggression in Asia”, conceptually linked and opportunistically driven [source 6, p. 29, 31]. It is recommended that counteraction should still be realised

by non-nuclear capabilities, but it is repeatedly noted that this may not be sufficient. At the same time, the report does not distinguish between a strategically significant “challenge” and a “threat” getting in the way, as seen in the current strategic planning documents. Both Russia and China are labelled as “*nuclear-armed adversaries*”, without systemically distinguishing the rank of threat they pose to US national security.

This represents the principle of “dual deterrence”: according to the report, the USA should recognise two militarily and strategically equal opponents in the contemporary world order and focus on deterring them, bearing in mind, among other things, the potential for simultaneous armed counteraction (including the appropriate nuclear weapons posture). The strategic military dimension of the “triplex” as a foundational element of the contemporary world order is clearly articulated throughout the document, although it remains intertwined with the political narrative of an “American-lead international order”.

While it is difficult to predict how quickly this perspective will make its way into the U.S.’s guiding strategic documents or what form it will take, its adoption seems inevitable. The primary barrier to this shift is largely psychological, as it stems from the long-standing reluctance of American elites to acknowledge parity with China and to abandon the narrative of a “declining Russia” that originated in the 1990s and 2000s. The final hopes of reverting to the past collapsed in 2020–2021, when it became clear that the Biden administration had no intention of reversing the course toward economic and technological decoupling between the US and China. What was once viewed by some within the American establishment, and by external observers, as a temporary aberration or emotional overreaction under D. Trump has since solidified into a long-term consensus in U.S. foreign policy.

This shift in strategy was mirrored in the military sphere, highlighting the core issue of strategic stability within the “triplex”. In June–August 2021, American experts, analyzing satellite images, uncovered large-scale construction deep within Chinese territory. These facilities were presumed to be three missile deployment areas



containing launching silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles. At that time, at least 280 objects were identified and interpreted as silos at various stages of construction [16, 17].

These events sparked an extensive discussion about the shift in Chinese nuclear strategy and China’s possible goal to achieve strategic parity with the U.S., significantly changing U.S. military assessments of China’s nuclear missile arsenal at the time in terms of prospects for its growth. By the end of 2023, China’s nuclear stockpile had grown to 500 warheads [source 7, p. 104]. For comparison, the estimate in 2022 was 410 warheads, and for many years prior, it had not exceeded 200–250 warheads. The US now projects that China’s nuclear arsenal could increase to 1,000 warheads by 2030 and reach up to 1,500 by 2035 [source 8, p. 98].

There are many quite realistic and reasonable arguments stating that China in fact does not need this kind of nuclear missile buildup to achieve its long-term goals. Some experts argue that this expansion does not align with China’s traditional deterrence strategy, and in certain cases, may not even be feasible from a technological standpoint. For instance, Kashin’s assessment of bottlenecks in China’s missile and nuclear weapons complex in the mid-2010s provides a more skeptical view [18]. While this remains a topic of intellectual debate, the strategic landscape is shifting dramatically — at least in the minds of policymakers — who are now compelled, in crafting deterrence strategies, to consider the mere possibility that China may be pursuing nuclear parity with the U.S.

## BEYOND STRATEGIC STABILITY

Viewing the military aspect of great powers’ relations through the prism of strategic stability is characterised by a considerable set of logical paradoxes. This is not surprising, since nuclear strategy and the principle of nuclear deterrence as such are profoundly contradictory, *per se*.

Strategic stability, as we know it, was formed in the shadow of the nuclear dyad between the United States and the Soviet Union. While it may not have been clearly or consistently defined as

a principle, it has been influenced by a combination of military-political, military-technical, and military-strategic factors, which together form the strategic landscape — the stage upon which “deterrence scenarios” unfold. As the world order shifts, and the nuclear super-system evolves beyond the bipolar structure, new practical approaches to maintaining strategic stability will inevitably need to be developed, while still preserving its core concept<sup>3</sup>.

The concept of quantitative strategic parity, which holds a special allure due to its simplicity, ease of evaluation, and its significant political implications both domestically and internationally, was a useful tool for assessing the stability of nuclear deterrence during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, by the end of the 1970s, with advances in military technology — specifically the development of multiple-warhead missiles — parity alone was no longer sufficient to ensure strategic stability within the U.S.-Soviet dyad, though it remained important for political and psychological reasons.

As a result, the only internationally agreed definition of strategic stability, established in 1990, shifted focus from the parity of nuclear capabilities to the absence of incentives for a first strike. In other words, it emphasised reducing the strategic value of such a strike by ensuring the resilience and strength of nuclear deterrence, making retaliation inevitable. Only if this sufficient condition is met, certain configurations of strategic arms, including the abandonment or limitation of certain systems, can enhance strategic stability through parity.

Following the bilateral cycle of eliminating the destabilising nuclear armament stockpiles in the 1990s and 2000s, a number of questions have arisen about the treatment of strategic stability

<sup>3</sup> The basis of this theory — quantitative symmetry of potentials as a basis of peaceful equilibrium — was laid in 1959 by Wohlstetter in his work “The Delicate Balance of Terror”. The criticism by Schelling which followed hot on the trail supplemented this principle by pointing out that the qualitative stability of deterrence (differential characteristic) is more important than the quantitative ratio of potentials (integral characteristic) [19, 20]. “Non-constructiveness” of the definition should be understood in a mathematical sense: describing the state, such a definition does not tell how to achieve it.

underpinning this cycle. What is the role of missile defense in the new nuclear order? What new factors are relevant to consider as part of the arms control agreement balance? Should the nuclear capabilities of third-party states be taken into account? What impact do regional nuclear “ways” (e.g. the Hindustani dyad) have on strategic stability in general?<sup>4</sup> What is the future trajectory of the nuclear non-proliferation regime?

The formalisation of the “triplex” has brought these issues to the forefront. The very idea of trilateral negotiations based on the former model reveals two key challenges: first, a sharp increase in the complexity of the negotiation process (as two negotiation channels expand to six), and second, a significant rise in both political and strategic military asymmetries. Addressing the problem of strategic stability within this new framework will require a major restructuring of traditional approaches to arms control.

#### WHAT IS DISCUSSED OUT LOUD WHEN THERE ARE MORE THAN TWO IN THE ROOM?

At this point, an interim conclusion should be drawn to establish the correct emphasis moving forward. The “triplex” is not a self-sufficient cause of the growing division and confrontation in international relations. Rather, the opposite is true: the intensifying confrontation within the “triplex” is a consequence of the broader increase in global political tensions.

Consequently, the key question is not how to avoid “tripolarity” in the international system (often perceived as architecturally “wrong” compared to the “right” bipolarity, which is associated with familiar strategic stability patterns). Some Western studies are partially burdened with this problem, trying for a long time to distinguish between the “tripolar” (rigid from the military strategy standpoint) and “triangular” (more flexible and vague) models of the world order [21, p. 56]. Instead, the focus should be

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the 1960s, H. Kahn, building his theory of the “escalation ladder”, pointed out that regional conflicts can act as detonators of global events; however, due to the peculiarities of the essentially bipolar nuclear super-system, he did not consider it necessary to take them into account.

on leveraging the endogenous characteristics of the “triplex” to maintain strategic stability and restructure the international security system in response to the emergence of a new polycentric world order.

However, how can the system of three “strategic bodies” be stabilised? To begin with, the strategic stability imperatives should be agreed on. As stated above, the goal of maintaining nuclear deterrence effectiveness is inherently complex and is not simply about achieving quantitative parity in arsenals. In fact, this task has become increasingly difficult, as the nuclear missile asymmetries of the late Cold War are now compounded by asymmetries in non-nuclear capabilities with strategic effects — those that can influence the stability of nuclear deterrence. This is manifested both in strike components (which can be roughly “measured” if the methodology is agreed upon) and information components which create qualitative superiority that is not reflected in “ceilings” or even in “counting ratios” (a similar methodology was proposed, for instance, by the U.S. in the early 1980s for strategic nuclear arms; the ratios were calculated based on the throw-weight). In the context of triangular relations, however, quantitative parity — whether in the form of equal arsenals or otherwise — does not act as a stabilising factor, as it does in a bipolar system. On the contrary, it tends to fuel an arms race, as each party perceives itself as lagging behind and fears a first-strike threat, an anxiety often exaggerated by pressure groups seeking to bolster their institutional status and control over resource flows.

In the attempts to outline the architecture of the triangular negotiation process, the issue of equal ceilings has been considered on several occasions. The primary objection lies in the differing nature of strategic relations among the three parties. Notably, Russia and China show little interest in negotiating trade-offs concerning each other’s nuclear forces or in accepting intrusive verification measures — key elements for the U.S., which formed the foundation of strategic stability during the era of START Treaties [22, p. 14, 15]. At the same time, fixing unequal ceilings for nuclear arms in control agreements — similar to the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty [23]

or the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) — seems politically unrealistic due to status concerns. Such agreements would also require a level of trust in international relations that is currently lacking. Ironically, this trust cannot be established without first achieving pragmatic stabilisation of the multilateral deterrence system, which would, in turn, depend on the conclusion of appropriate agreements.

The main factors effective in the nuclear deterrence system at the current stage are as follows:

- strong emphasis on the survivability of nuclear stockpiles pertaining not only to ensuring resilience against an enemy’s first (dismantling) nuclear strike but also to countering non-nuclear strike capabilities and the effects of modern intelligence, surveillance, and targeting technologies;
- combined approach to counterforce escalation which includes gradual use of non-nuclear and nuclear capabilities in different operational environments — often referred to as integrated deterrence;
- wide range of scenarios for the first use of nuclear weapons based on deeply entrenched doctrines of limited nuclear warfare;
- the ongoing effect of the “stability/instability paradox” which creates new arenas for direct confrontation below the nuclear threshold, and even below the threshold of armed conflict, creating new, sometimes non-obvious, risks of escalation [24].

As a result, the very notion of “guaranteed means of retaliatory strike” becomes blurred since a limited (including a single) nuclear strike can also be a “retaliatory” one within the framework of “war bargaining”. The familiar problem of missile defense appears paradoxical — it serves in these scenarios as a means of raising the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, while “closing” certain areas from single nuclear strikes. The latter drives a race in missile technology, including the development of hypersonic weapons capable of bypassing missile defense.

In this evolving landscape, mass nuclear salvos are less significant in terms of sheer numbers. What matters now is the ability to retain and use certain capabilities (including non-nuclear ones)

in a controlled manner, ideally allowing for escalation dominance during a crisis. In other words, the focus has shifted from quantitative equality to qualitative stability — a trend that began in the 1980s and has increasingly become the priority in building a reliable nuclear deterrence system. This issue is especially relevant today due to the rising importance of extended deterrence, where the U.S. provides security assurances to allies far from its own borders, on the periphery of Eurasia. This challenge is unique to the U.S. and does not burden the strategic planning of China or Russia.

When considering the future of arms control within the “triplex”, this leads to highly complex conclusions. F. Miller, a prominent figure in American nuclear policy during the late 1980s, argues that the United States, having achieved a sufficient level of deterrence, should not pursue numerical parity with Russia and China if they engage in an arms race (literally: “their ability “to make the rubble bounce” is not strategically significant and should not be perceived as such” [26, p. 43]). However, Miller quickly adds a caveat: this approach should not extend to arms control agreements, where it is crucial to establish equal ceilings. At first glance, this seems contradictory. However, through the lens of a qualitative approach, this viewpoint creates opportunities for political maneuvering by parties that are confident in the effectiveness of their deterrence capabilities.

It cannot be asserted that such a transformation of strategic relations within the “triplex” will be conciliatory. In particular, Savelyev points out [27, pp. 213-215] that if China enters into restrictive agreements, it may need to alter key tenets of its nuclear policy, particularly its stance on the no-first-use of nuclear weapons. The opacity surrounding China’s nuclear arsenal, combined with the uncertainty about the nature of its nuclear deployments, contributes to a high level of strategic ambiguity — a cornerstone of China’s nuclear policy. Any changes in this area could incentivise China to adopt a more retaliatory posture, or even consider a first-strike policy. Moreover, some aspects of China’s current military buildup may suggest that decisions to modify



its nuclear policy have already been made, likely driven by the broader deterioration of the strategic environment. If this is the case, it could institutionally facilitate the start of a meaningful dialogue on nuclear issues, should Beijing eventually develop the political will to negotiate.

The paradox of “multilateral” strategic stability can also be seen in the third-player problem. During the mid-Cold War, mathematical abstractions suggested that the presence of a third nuclear power, even if not comparable to the two leading superpowers before a conflict, could become a decisive factor after a nuclear war. This third party, untouched by nuclear strikes and retaining both moral high ground and strategic capability, could exert military pressure on the devastated superpowers, potentially “winning” the war without ever being directly involved. (For now, we will set aside the practical realities of applying this speculative game theory concept to actual nuclear warfare and its catastrophic consequences for societies, civilization, and the environment. However, it is worth noting that the renewed interest in limited nuclear warfare and nuclear escalation control could breathe new life into these theoretical constructs).

This situation can in some cases become self-contained in a “triplex” of relatively equal nuclear powers not easily reduced to a “stable marriage”. In fact, the presence of a third player can act as an additional deterrent, preventing any two actors from escalating to nuclear weapons — or even limited use — for fear of ultimately losing their post-war strategic advantage, no matter how tenuous.

The problem becomes all the more salient if we consider the entire nuclear super-system. In particular, China’s nuclear deterrence is not aimed solely at the U.S. but also, in an almost comparable way, India. The result is the cascading security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific region where any doctrinal or military developments surrounding the U.S. — China confrontation incentivise India to enhance its nuclear missile capabilities, which in turn pressures Pakistan to respond in kind. As a result, conditions are already in place for a multilateral nuclear arms race in Asia, driven by the natural response of each ac-

tor to its national security concerns. This is yet another aspect of maintaining strategic stability within the “triplex”, which was not as prominent in the former bipolar system.

Furthermore, there are notable differences in the key problems of bilateral versus trilateral strategic relations. During the Cold War, the primary concern in bilateral relations was the fear of a first strike by the enemy — initially the threat of total nuclear annihilation, as envisioned by the Douhet doctrine, and later the fear of a disarming “counterforce” operation. The arms race was an instinctive response to this fear. However, in the “triplex” system, the central issue is likely the arms race itself, rather than just the fear of a first strike.

The only way to push the triangular relationship into a “strategic heart attack” during an arms race would be if one actor attempted to establish strategic parity with the other two by forming a “stable marriage” alliance, aimed at creating the conditions for a potential disarming strike. This mirrors the U.S. nuclear strategy before the early 1960s, which did not account for separate nuclear war scenarios against the USSR and China. Instead, the U.S. planned for a simultaneous strike on both, despite China not yet possessing nuclear weapons and the USSR having far fewer operational warheads — roughly 15–20 times fewer than the U.S. However, such an attempt to achieve strategic superiority would be unlikely to succeed in the current “triplex” because the allied pair in this hypothetical “marriage” would respond symmetrically to any buildup by the third actor. This would prevent the establishment of comfortable conditions for strategic dominance. This historical episode helps illustrate why the “triplex” is often seen as a “generator” of arms races.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal is to ensure the stability of nuclear deterrence by creating sufficiently high risks of deterrent damage for any side of the “triplex” in relation to the other two.

In this context, establishing parity in a triangular system may not appear to align with



the principle of arms race stability at first glance. However, it addresses several political issues, including status concerns and regulatory requirements of certain states. For instance, Jackson's 1973 amendment prohibited agreements on the control of “intercontinental” arms that would formalise any quantitative disadvantage for the U.S. compared to other powers. At the same time, focusing on the survivability of retaliatory forces and minimising incentives for the first use of nuclear weapons can help maintain deterrence, even if numerical parity is disrupted in any “triplex” scenario — whether it's a “stable marriage” or a “war of all against all”.

Any long-standing attempts to invent a trilateral format for arms control agreements are likely to remain just theoretical exercises and mental experiments in the coming years. Now it seems highly unlikely that the parties succeed in practically finding a single balance and offset model to suit all involved actors, or will even be willing to do so.

However, there are opportunities for maneuvering within an “disconnected triangle” structure. The mutual concerns along the “USA–Russia” and “USA–China” axes are partially similar, but diverge in many areas due to geostrategic factors, varied military-political relations, and different deterrence postures. In this regard, the “art of the possible” appears more realistic, potentially taking the form of two separate agreements (or groups of agreements) with different scopes and methodologies. Nevertheless, both agreements should adhere to basic principles: maintaining rough parity in capabilities and implementing a robust system of measures to ensure the survivability of deterrent forces. The U.S. is likely to pursue this interaction model, one that is familiar from the Cold War era and would allow greater flexibility in balancing “dual deterrence”.

The only disadvantage of this scheme is extremely significant: in terms of international law, it essentially “legalises” China's nuclear missile rearmament to levels comparable to those of Russia and the United States. At the same time, by ensuring the survivability of deterrent forces and the stability of communication and command systems, China could become more confident in

its strategic position, potentially refraining from reaching the maximum ceiling. This could serve as an important signal to halt the quantitative arms race.

In this situation, the realisation of multilateral regimes can be achieved by exploring the areas of interest not previously covered by arms control agreements. In some areas, loose formats with point-based “stringent” agreements, along with the strengthening of the platform for dialogue, can be sufficient at the outset. The set of problem areas has long been known and generally coincides with the Russian “security equation” matrix: non-nuclear weapons with strategic effect, arms in space, and missile defense. The American side will certainly wish to discuss non-strategic nuclear weapons as well, which seems realistic only in the case of Washington's constructive and materialised attention to Moscow's concerns previously framed as the “security equation”.

However, any sufficiently visible moves beyond conventional nuclear risk control and de-escalation would first require resolving the acute phase of the international security crisis. Any serious “compartmentalisation” of arms control is not possible as such since it would rest on the extremely shaky foundation of the ongoing active confrontation of the parties that are only a couple of steps away from being engaged in a direct armed conflict; thus, its results would be largely devalued. H. Bull wrote in 1961 that arms control “is relevant when tension is at a certain point, above which it is impossible and beneath which it is unnecessary.” [28, p. 75].

The parties' rhetoric in recent years clearly indicates their loss of some basic outlines of reality that were taken as a common denominator in the epoch of the “institutionalised” Cold War. The notion that we are entering a “new 1950s”, characterised by forceful brinkmanship (which culminated in the Berlin and Cuban Missile Crises of 1961–1962), carries some historical validity. These crises were successfully resolved, though the perception of them as manageable may reflect a “survivorship bias”. Therefore, solutions must involve articulating what may seem like obvious principles (which, unfortunately, are not obvious to everyone today). For instance, the importance

of joint statements made in the early 1970s should not be underestimated, including the 1971 Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Risk of Outbreak of Nuclear War Between the USA and the USSR, the 1972 Basic Principles of Relations Between the USA and the USSR, and the 1973 Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement. Notably, this era also saw the first set of rules aimed at reducing the risk of incidents between the ships and aircraft of these major powers. The experience of that period demonstrates a basic yet effective logic for progress that remains relevant today. It also suggests that efforts to reduce strategic military threats in the “triplex” must occur alongside broader political détente. This would require, on the one hand, a political resolution to the Ukrainian crisis that ensures indivisible and equal security for all involved parties, and on the other, the stabilisation of the situation around Taiwan and, more broadly, in the seas surrounding China.

In these terms, the recent reaffirmation of the Gorbachev — Reagan formula (“a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”) by the P5 states in January 2022 should be regarded as a model step in the right direction. The value

of smaller-scale, pragmatic discussions aimed at stabilising discourse should not be underestimated, especially today, when addressing global security challenges requires moving away from emotionally charged rhetoric and toward pragmatic recognition of common survival interests.

It should be noted that progress in strengthening trilateral strategic stability, even on its own, could de-escalate tensions within the “triplex”, reducing the likelihood of an undesirable scenario: a forced “stable marriage.” In such a scenario, China would lose flexibility in its foreign policy, Russia would largely subordinate its military and political interests to China, and the United States would face not just two equal rivals but an unprecedentedly hostile nuclear alliance. From this perspective, more complex, multilayered approaches to strengthening strategic stability within the “triplex” — though less stable and more difficult to implement — are more aligned with the idea of a polycentric world order. Such approaches promote the synchronisation of foreign policy and military strategies in avoiding a return to bipolarity, while encouraging the development of multilateral international security institutions.

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