



Spring Session of the *Trialogue* Club International

**«Asymmetric Triangle:
Deepening of U.S.-China Confrontation and its Implications for Russia»**

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SPEAKER'S THESIS

The Russian leadership believes that the U.S.-China confrontation is structural, and this rivalry will be the defining factor of the global dynamics in decades to come. The Kremlin views this rivalry predominantly through the lens of *realpolitik*, the ideological dimension (competition between liberalism and authoritarianism) is viewed as a narrative envelope for great power competition. Moscow is aware that the global system will become increasingly polarized, with great powers and less powerful states gravitating closer to either Beijing or Washington.

In an ideal world, Moscow would prefer not to choose sides, maintain Russia's full strategic autonomy, and establish pragmatic relations with both the U.S. and China without getting involved into deepening rift between the two superpowers. The optimal architecture of global security, in the Kremlin's view, would be a «new Yalta» with more great powers at the table. In this architecture Russia would be in an exclusive club of second-tier great powers (with the first tier occupied by the U.S. and China) that maintain full strategic autonomy and have global reach at the same time.

The reality, however, is very different. In the current circumstances Russia is deepening ties with China, while relationship with the U.S. is in a free fall. Moscow is increasingly aligning with Beijing in a joint pushback against the West. The root cause of this situation is Russia's bitter confrontation with the U.S. over some core issues for the Kremlin, including interference in domestic politics, strategic stability, and U.S. views for regional NATO-centric security arrangements in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. This confrontation predates the 2016 interference in American elections and even 2014 war in Ukraine and is very unlikely to be resolved in the near future unless either of the sides opts for a dramatic change of course. Confrontation with the West, as well as domestic tightening in Russia, will negatively impact Russia's relations with Europe.

Russia's partnership with China predates its rupture with the West, and is driven by fundamental factors beyond deepening confrontation with the U.S. These factors include need to maintain stability along the 4,200 km border, economic complementarity, and growing resemblance of the Russian and Chinese political systems – with shared vision for the global commons (R2P, data localization, architecture of Internet governance etc.). But U.S./EU sanctions against Russia after 2014, and deepening confrontation between China and the West are dramatically increasing the pace and scale of rapprochement.

Neither China nor Russia are seeking a full-fledged alliance. An alliance would mean limits to strategic autonomy and cause unnecessary frictions around issues of hierarchy. It would also mean involvement in each other's conflicts with other parties (Ukraine, South China Sea, etc.) that both sides would like to avoid since they do not have much skin in the game. Not that mutual distrust and some frictions around espionage or security arrangements in Central Asia is totally gone. Still, forced by America's dual containment policy, Moscow and Beijing are stepping up their cooperation, including on global and regional security.

Byproduct of the current dynamics is Russia's growing asymmetric dependence on China, in which Moscow needs Beijing more than the other way around. For the nearest future, Russia has enough room to grow dependency on China, but in 10-15 years down the road Beijing may have leverage to start pressuring Russia in order to advance its interests on issues like Moscow's defense cooperation with India and Vietnam, seek unilateral support for China's policies without reciprocity, etc.