Asia: International Relations Essay, Research Paper

International Relations Of Asia

STRATEGIC GEOMETRY

“This is the only region in the world where so many combinations and

permutations of two- three and four- and even two plus four or three plus three-

power games can be played on the regional chessboard with all their complexities

and variations.”

introduction

The concept of strategic geometry comprises the notion that that the

interactions and interconnections between a number of political actors within a

particular system of international relations, either global or regional can be

seen in terms of geometric patterns of strategic configurations. It can be a

case of simple geometry, in which A interacts with B: but in a more complex

system such as that of Asia, with the presence of more than one major actor,

each with their distinct, sometimes conflicting political agendas, the

interaction between A and B will be likely to affect C or influenced by C.

The concept of an international ?system’ itself implies that events are

not random, and units within the system are interrelated in some patterned way.

This ?patterning’ maybe envisaged or conceptualized as patterns of strategic

geometry.

Any attempt to analyze the transition from a Cold War system of

international relations to a post Cold War one, will incorporate an analysis of

the general nature of the system itself, in this case the system of

international relations in Asia; of the actors involved and their respective

roles; how changes in the political environment and in specific policies of the

actors shape the evolution of a new system; and finally the nature of the new

system with its own actors, their new roles, and new concerns.

The concept of strategic geometry enables us to understand these

changes in the political dynamics from one system to another, in our case the

transition from the Cold War to the post Cold War era, by serving as an analytic

tool. If we view the international relations of Asia, more and the interactions

of the main actors in terms of strategic configurations and geometric patterns

of alignments and oppositions, then we can assess changes in the political

system over time by way of the changes in the strategic geometry. Some strategic

configurations change, others remain the same, while new patterns of strategic

geometry appear, as the old forms dissolve–the explanations behind the shifting

pattern of strategic geometry is what enables us to understand the transition

from the Cold War era to the post Cold War.

Geopolitical and politico-economic factors have in some cases changed

the content, but not the form of the particular strategic configurations and in

some cases however, we find both form and content are changed. In my essay I

will focus on this dual analysis of the content and form of the major patterns

of strategic geometry and their change over time from Cold War to post Cold War.

In order to assess the usefulness of the concept of strategic geometry, we must

first see how well the concept is expressed in the international relations of

Asia. Firstly I will briefly outline the general strategic concerns or tenets of

the Cold War era, the roles and interactions of the actors involved, and the

major strategic geometric patterns this produced. The second part of my essay

will comprise an analysis of the evolution of the system, and the tenets of the

new post cold war system, drawing attention at the same time to the usefulness

of the concept of strategic geometry to explain the transition.

One may even conceptualize pre -Cold War international relations in

strategic geometric terms: the past is replete with instances of three-way

interactions between Japan, China and the Soviet Union. According to Mandlebaum,

the fate of the region has “for the last two centuries’ depended ?on the fate of

three major powers–China, Japan and Russia, on the stability and tranquillity

of their mutual relations.” Hence we may presume that it is not novel or

unknown to apply the concept of strategic geometry to Asia and as I shall

illustrate it will prove particularly useful in understanding the transition

from the Cold War to the post Cold War era.

Let us begin with a simpler model of strategic geometry which existed in

Europe during the Cold War. From 1948 onwards, a more or less clear-cut line

divided Europe into two main political and military blocs: the communist bloc

and the free world of Western Europe, resulting in an almost perfect bipolarity.

However, the politics in Asia during the same period were more dynamic and

nuanced than just the simple East-West divide of Europe. Here, there was none

of “the sharp structural clarity of Europe,” no drawing of a line, no Iron

Curtain; rather, there existed a more complex web of international relations,

because of the physical presence of three great powers: the Soviet Union, China

and Japan. And from 1945 onwards, another great power, the United States, took

up a permanent political and military residence in the region. These four major

powers have dominated the East Asia region both during the Cold War and

continue to do so in the post- Cold War era, hence according to Mandlebaum, “the

appropriate geometric metaphor was and still is the strategic quadrangle.” The

interactions of these four main powers-sometimes in cooperation, other times in

conflict- have shaped the international relations of Asia. How this took place

during and after the Cold War is in many ways quite dissimilar. However, more

importantly than the all encompassing quadrangle, it is the strategic geometry

within the quadrangle that is most interesting and illustrates best, the changes

and nuances in the transition from Cold War to post Cold War. The interactions

within the strategic quadrangle itself, have been generally of a bilateral or

triangular nature. As Mandlebaum suggests “Indeed in Asia, the structure of

politics all along has been more complex than the stark bipolarity of Europe.

Rather than two competing systems, Asia’s international order was a clutter of

triangles.” The triangle is the predominant strategic geometric metaphor

characterizing the nature of interactions in East Asia, especially during the

Cold War and to a less intense degree in the post Cold War era.

the Cold War era

The Cold War system of international relations was a geopolitical

intermixing of security, ideology and the balance of power, especially military

power. Everything took root from two essential conflicts: firstly, the US-

Soviet opposition and secondly, from the 1970s onwards the Sino-Soviet split;

and from one essential alliance: the US-Japanese partnership. Each of these

bilateral alliances or oppositions affected in some way a third party. ?The most

well-known and widely debated triangle being the Sino-Soviet-US grouping with at

least 4 possible configurations.”

One may just turn towards one actor in the system, or one player in the

Strategic Quadrangle, to see the preoccupation with strategic geometry. As

Mandlebaum states: “For no country more than the Soviet Union did the underlying

structure of Asian international politics revolve about a complex

interconnected set of triangular relationships. The most obvious and famous of

the triangles linked the Soviet Union, China and the United States, but the

Soviet-US- Japan triangle was also important. In addition, five others also

helped to shape Soviet policy 1. Sino-Soviet -Japanese triangle 2. Sino-Soviet-

North Korean triangle 3. Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese triangle 4. Soviet-Vietnamese-

ASEAN triangle 5. Sino-Soviet-Indian triangle. Though from this perspective,

certain things stand out. First, China’s centrality: China figures in nearly all

of the triangles, not even the US affected Soviet policy to this degree. Second,

the full set of triangles that impeded, shaped and invigorated the policies of

Gorbachev’s predecessors varied greatly in importance, all of them overshadowed

by the crucial Sino-Soviet-US triangle. Indeed the others owed much of their

dynamic to the course of events in this main triangle.” Through the 1960s,

there were 4 main triangles in the Asian political arena: Soviet Union-China-

North Vietnam, Soviet Union-Japan-US, Sino-Soviet-Indian- and Soviet Union-

China-North Korea. In the 1970s, however this changed not only because more

triangles were added, but because they included a new kind of triangle, the

Sino-Soviet-US triangle.

“Normally triangles are not thought of as a stable form in social or

political relationships nor as a stabilizing influence within a larger setting.

The great post-war exception was the Soviet-US-Japan triangle. Relationships

among the three countries scarcely changed, apart from fluctuations in US-Soviet

and US-Japanese relations from time to time. Its immobility may have been the

single most stabilizing element in post war Asian politics.” The Soviet-

Japanese-American triangle drove Soviet policy towards Japan, since the Soviets

viewed Japan as a creature of American engagement in Asia. A whole series of

strategic triangles were borne out of the cold war climate which make strategic

geometry very useful and illuminating model to study the international

relations of Asia during the period. However, our emphasis is on the usefulness

of the concept for studying the ?transition’ from Cold War to post Cold War.

This requires an analysis of both systems, in order to assess the process of

change.

the post-Cold War era: changes in the system

Today, we are in a relatively ?open’ period of history, free from the

polarized nature of the Cold War, yet “more than ever each of the four powers

has compelling stakes in its relations with the other three. More than ever each

of the four counts as a separate and independent player, none has the power or

inclination to destroy the equilibrium.” But what about strategic geometry? With

the disappearance of the Soviet threat is it still a useful model for the study

of international relations in Asia? Or is its use limited to the great power

play of the Cold War? And most importantly, how can the concept of strategic

geometry lend to our understanding of the transition from the Cold War to the

post Cold War system of international relations in Asia?

First, I will briefly outline the features of the transition.

The tenets of the post Cold War system seem to be the predominance of

economic considerations, national welfare and stability. Mandlebaum expresses

his view of the transition from a Cold War to a post Cold War system, when he

states: “nations, including those in East Asia, crossed into a world in which

they had more to bear from dangers than enemies….dangers of political,

economic, and ecological disorder…the primary stakes ceased to be security,

but welfare…no longer war and peace, but the vitality of societies and the

dynamism of economies.”

To begin with what constitutes ?power’ has changed dramatically in wake

of the demise of the Soviet Union. The shift from a military to an economic

definition of power, from “a geopolitical to a geoeconomic axis” resulting from

“wholesale change in the entire military-strategic edifice in Asia,” has in its

turn, produced “a radically different range of collaborations among the four

major powers.” Though, military concerns still warrant a significant priority,

as some of today’s triangles demonstrate, especially considering the presence of

three out of five of the world’s nuclear powers in the region. On the whole

however, today’s Asia is one of mutually dependent economies “where economics is

the name of the game.” The concept of strategic geometry has a reduced validity

or maybe more aptly termed ?economic geometry.’ With the rise of the Asian

tigers, and Japan’s status of an economic superpower, coupled with greater

regionalism such as embodied by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and ASEAN,

there is more diversification of power in East Asia, at least in economic terms.

Understanding the change from a Cold War to a post Cold War system also

requires an understanding of the transition in terms of military power. China

and Japan are the rising military powers, while Russia is a declining one.

Strategic geometry very useful in assessing the transition in these terms.

Instead of Japan and the US balancing Russian military power, today Japan and

the US act to balance Chinese military power. I will elaborate on this issue

later, in my discussion of the Japan-US-China triangle.

Democracy and prosperity, two traditional goals are back on the US

agenda after the disappearance of the Soviet threat. Yet for the US, like for

the others, the post Cold War is still dominated by considerations of power and

wealth; fear of the first and lure of the second keeping the US engaged in East

Asia.

Russia’s preoccupation with internal restructuring and the rise of

Central Asia has meant that Russia’s role in the strategic quadrangle has become

as “less of a player than a problem.” Within the quadrangle, Russia has

replaced the Soviet Union. “The radical revision of Russia’s surroundings not

only profoundly affects Russian foreign policy and therefore indirectly East

Asia, but it directly affects East Asia because of the new, intervening reality

of Central Asia. From the standpoint of the others, the Soviet threat is not of

warfare but of diminished national and international welfare.”

China’s emphasis on economic modernization. China has been the least

changed by the ending of the Cold War since its great shift in course came a

decade earlier, at the end of 1970s which saw the development of Deng Xiaoping’s

program of economic reform. The post Cold War era sees China more firmly

committed to a capitalist vision, with its focus on economic modernization and

growth. This in turn has produced China’s ?omni-directional’ foreign policy. The

prospects accruing from Chinese economic modernization and at the same time, the

specter of Chinese growth as it affects the other powers has given rise to new

forms of strategic geometry, or provided the old forms of strategic geometry

with a renewed basis.

The post Cold War era is also characterized by Japan’s increasingly

independent stance from the United States and its attempts at greater

militarization.

A major feature of the transition form a Cold War system to a post Cold

War system is the reversal in roles of the major powers. China has basically

become a status-quo power, the United States has become something of a

revolutionary state, seeking to transform the others and mould them in its own

image ( exemplified by the stress on democracy, economic liberalization, human

rights ).

We also witness the reversal of Japan’s and Russia’s post war roles,

with Russia now being the one buffeted in the goings-on between China and

Japan.

Furthermore, the continental landmass of Asia, dominated by Russia and

China occupies the physical and strategic core of the area, a core that has

radiated its effects through the sub-regions of the Korean peninsulas, and SEA

and to the surrounding archipelagos. “Today the core is weak and unsure of

itself, while the periphery is solid and confident.” This change in fortune

from the Cold War to the post Cold War era can be seen by way of the new

strategic geometry and the rise of new triangles of interactions, especially

including Korea.

Hence, we see the emergence of new actors, or old ones with new powers

to influence the international relations of the region, most importantly North

and South Korea and the issue of their unification, and the issue of the island

of Taiwan.

These myriad of changes that constitute the transition from the Cold

War to the post Cold War system of international relations in Asia; both

changes in the general political climate and the changes in individual political

agendas can be seen through the new and modified patterns of strategic geometry.

I will focus on three such patterns: 1. the US-Japan-China triangle, where the

form of the strategic geometry has stayed the same but its content has altered

with a greater emphasis on economics 2. the content and form of triangles

involving Russia 3. the new form and content of triangles involving Korea. An

analysis of these three examples of strategic geometry in the post Cold War era

will highlight the usefulness of the concept in analyzing the transition in the

system from one era to the next.

the US-Japan-China triangle

An analysis of the US-Japan-China, an old triangle with new content

illustrates many features of the transition from the Cold War to the post Cold

War system of international relations. During the Cold War “both Tokyo and

Washington developed their China policies in part to thwart Moscow’s designs

towards China and Asia.” The US and China no longer act together to balance

Soviet power; the US-Japan alliance no longer serves as a weight against

balancing the power of both China and the Soviet Union; and Japan and China do

not architect their relationship in light of US policies. The US-Japan-China

triangle in the post cold war era rather illustrates all three nations’ concern

with economic prosperity and trade: American policy of placing trade at the

center of US-Japan relations; China’s emphasis on economic modernization

constituting the cornerstone of its foreign policy; Japan’s policy of ?expanding

equilibrium.’ Today’s US-Japan-China triangle also reveals Japan’s increasingly

independent stance from the US, the US’s stress on democracy and human rights,

the reversal of the roles of China and the US, greater China-Japan bilateralism.

The game of power – the attempts at gaining military , and more importantly

economic leverage for oneself and controlling that of the other powers- is still

evident, despite the dissolution of a ?universal’ threat. But it is only who’s

playing against who that has changed. So the concept of strategic geometry is

still valid and applicable. “Potential competition and mutual distrust between

China and Japan were it to grow into something large would replace the post war

contest between the US and the Soviet Union as dominant feature of international

politics in Asia.” During the Cold War, US military presence in Asia served as a

deterrence against the military power of the Soviet Union; in the post Cold War

era, it is a form of reassurance against the rise of Chinese military power.

Relations with Japan is the most important bilateral relation Beijing

has, after that with Washington. “PRC leaders see an intimate connection between

their policies towards Washington and Tokyo. From Beijing’s perspective there is

a ?strategic triangle’ in Asia (US, Japan and China) and it is Beijing’s purpose

to utilize that three way relationship to its advantage.” Beijing seeks to use

the prospect of improved political and economic ties with Japan to induce

Washington to be more politically cooperative, relax sanctions and encourage

more American investment. On the other hand, “Japan is the principal economic

and security challenge looming in China’s future.” Despite greater bilateralism

between Japan and China based on the economic stakes and increasing volume of

trade, China still harbors a fear of Japanese economic domination and a deep

distrust in general. America’s capital, willingness to transfer technology and

ability to restrain Japan all serve China’s interests. The disappearance of the

Soviet threat has undermined the stability of the US-Japanese partnership,

hence the distance between Japan and US has meant that China has become all the

more important to Washington. A closer security relationship between US and

China would further diminish the strategic importance of Japan to the US. At the

same time “China looms all the more important for Japan as US interest, presence

and influence in Asia seem to diminish.” This means America’s differences with

China over human rights issues could also drive a wedge between US-Japan

relations, since Japan would not join the US in imposing trade sanctions on

China, owing to its own bilateral stakes. However, “in the long run Japan’s

ability to counter the geopolitical challenge from China depends on maintaining

a robust alliance with the US.” Furthermore, in the post Cold War era, the

island of Taiwan is reshaping politics of the Quadrangle, adding another

dimension to the US-Japan-China triangle, since the US’s ideological

proclivities towards Taiwan are in opposition to Japan’s economic

proclivities towards the mainland. According to Peter Hayes, North East Asia is

overlaid by twin informal strategic triangles: the US “has linked China and

Japan in an informal security triangle, and the common hypotenuse between this

great power triangle on the one hand, and the informal security triangle among

South Korea, US and Japan on the other.”

Korea

Another major strategic change involves the economic rise of South Korea

and isolation of the North. The rise of North and South Korea as major players

in the Asian political arena is emblematic of the transition from the Cold War

to the post Cold War system of international relations in the region. “Korea was

important to the US only as a strategic tripwire for its Japan centered extended

deterrence in the region.” Korea was symbolic of America’s cold war resolve to

draw the containment line in East Asia. Political alignment in the region vis-a-

vis both Koreas is demonstrative of differences between Cold War and post Cold

War. The evolution of triangles involving the two Koreas highlight the

decreasing role of ideology, socialist confrere and geopolitical rivalry, and

the increasing importance of stability, world order, regional peace

and economic prosperity. During the Cold War there existed two basic triangles

involving Korea: one comprising the US, Japan, South Korea and the other

comprising North Korea, Soviet Union, China. Since 196 5 the US-Japan-South

Korea triangle, as Kent Calder argues emerged as another key feature of the

highly dynamic but unbalanced economic and security relations of the region. In

1993, the scenario was entirely different with the US-Japan-South Korea-China-

Russia all against North Korea, owing to its forward nuclear policy.

The “rapid progress in Moscow-Seoul relations, coupled with an equally

rapid decompression of Moscow-Pyongyang relations, has taken the sting out of

the long festering ideological and geopolitical rivalry China, and the former

Soviet Union engaged in over North Korea. The ending of Cold War bipolarity has

meant the demise of not only the vaunted China card in the collapsed strategic

triangle (North Korea-China -Soviet Union) but also the Pyongyang card in the

old Sino-Soviet rivalry.” The rapprochement between China and South Korea in

1992, as a means to establish regional peace, hinted a possible emergence of a

triangular relationship with the PRC in the best position to influence the two

Koreas. The increasing economic interaction between China and South Korea, a

major inspiration and product of the rapprochement is coupled with North Korea’s

attempts at gradually adopting the South Korea model of economic development

transmitted through China. Through this triangle we see the emphasis on

political stability and economic prosperity, quite different to the post Cold

War concerns involving Korea and China. The rapprochement between North and

South Korea has also forced Japan to build her ties with the former. From

Japan’s point of view this is necessary for the building of a ?new international

order,’ while from North Korea’s perspective this represents an opening for

economic assistance from Japan. Everyone now wants a piece of the pie, even

North Korea!

Moreover, during the Cold War, the US consistently supported and

enhanced South Korea in its rivalry with North Korea. With the demise of the

Soviet Union, the US endorsed South Korea’s ambitious northern diplomacy

(Nordpolitik) that was primarily designed to normalize its relations with the

Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe, but was also intended to ease its frozen

confrontation with North Korea. During the Cold War the US regarded its military

position in the Korean peninsula as a pivotal buffer to protect Japan’s security

interests and to counterbalance strategic ascendancy of the Soviet Union and

China. According to Curtis, today “US troops serve as a buffer between the two

Koreas, as a check against Japan’s military expansion and as a message to China

and Russia that the US will remain a Pacific power. It is the most visible

evidence of the US resolve to protect US economic interests.” Hence, the

politics of the Korean peninsula, which have become so integral to the system

of international relations in Asia can be seen in terms of a whole set of

triangular interactions.

Russia

Another way in which strategic geometry is a useful concept for

understanding the transition from a Cold War to a post Cold War system is

through the disappearance and obsoleteness of some of the old triangles. Russia

is such as case in point.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has radically altered the face of

international politics in East Asia, beginning with Gorbachev who revised three

central features of post war Soviet policy in Asia by: 1. freeing it from the

albatross of Sino-Soviet conflict 2. by suppressing the dominating idea of an

East-West contest, shifted Soviet policy towards Japan. 3.by ending the Sino-

Soviet conflict meant that China was no longer the motivation for Moscow’s

preoccupation with quantity and quality of arms, and hence did away with the

significance of the Sino-Soviet-US triangle. “By altering Soviet priorities and

by changing with whom and for what reason the Soviet Union would compete,

Gorbachev brought an end to the pernicious geometry of the previous three

decades. Triangles, by definition, are inherently tension filled; they are

tripolarity with built in antagonism. Until, Gorbachev the quadrangle was in

fact, two- perhaps-three-triangles. He terminated two triangles in which Soviet

Union had a part.”

In the post Cold War era, “Russia’s relevance is not likely to be a

factor affecting the basic equilibrium in East Asia.” According to Mandlebaum,

Russia and her new neighbors have become of marginal importance to the central

concerns of the other three powers. The fall of communism and Russia’s less

intrusive role in Asia has meant that many of the old interactions and old

triangles have ceased to be relevant. This power who to the greatest extent,

viewed the politics of Asia in terms of strategic geometry, today, has a

diminished presence, if virtually a non-existent one in the regions major

strategic geometry. Asia to the Russians has become Central Asia. “The Soviet

Union’s security agenda whose focus divided entirely between China and US-

Japanese connection, while not wholly abandoned has for the new Russia shifted

dramatically towards Central Asia.” Subsequently this has meant China’s

increased importance among East Asian states for Russia. Currently, Russia’s

most important ally in Asia is Kazakhstan, having taken on the role of

Kazakhstan’s nuclear protector (not unlike the US with Japan), but Russia also

cares about internal developments within Kazakhstan and the evolution of its

foreign relations, particularly with China. There maybe prospects here for a

lesser regional triangle between Russia-China-Kazakhstan.

A study of the strategic geometry involving Russia today sheds light on

many aspects of the shift from a Cold War to a post Cold War system. According

to Mandlebaum, “the collapse of the Soviet Union has already given rise to a

debate on the possibilities of a new strategic triangle involving the US, Japan

and Russia.” Russia’s role in today’s Sino-Japanese-Russian triangle is in

balancing the power of both China and Japan. Russia and Japan have reversed

roles in the post Cold War–Japan is now the major league player and Russia is

the secondary player, buffeted by the happenings in Sino-Japanese relations.

“Should the Sino-Japanese-Russian triangle revive, it will be much more dramatic

than the late 19th century and Cold war versions,” posits Mandlebaum. The new

basis for Japan-China-Russia triangle is also to maintain a more congenial

regional environment. The emphasis has shifted to stability and peace.

Today Sino-Russian bilateral relations are based on a ?constructive

partnership’ for accelerated economic cooperation including Russian arms sales

to China and an overt ?meeting of the minds’ on Central Asia. Tensions will

again rise, especially since Sino-Russian competition for influence in the

buffer states of inner Asia that are now emerging will be permanent. According

to Mandlebaum, “we have not seen the end of their rivalry.” On the other hand,

is the view that neither country has much the other needs, with both looking

towards Japan and America for capital. Economics is the name of the game in East

Asia, and Russia looks like a minor league player to Chinese, coupled with a

deep level of cultural suspicion.

On the other hand, the most crucial of the Cold War triangles, the

Russia-US-China triangle seems to hold relatively little significance. However,

two political games of today, might still substantiate the existence of this

triangle 1.the crux of Chinese analysis– that there is an inherent conflict

between Moscow and Washington, on matters of aid and weapons build down which

will provide openings for its own diplomacy 2. the weapons issue– “the US fears

China’s success in skimming cream of weapons experts from Russia.” The latter is

a very Cold War type of concern: the issue of military strength, which continues

to interlock the three major military powers.

In reference to the US-Japan-Russia triangle, the Japan-Russia part of

the triangle still remains quite undeveloped.