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**NEW GEOPOLITICS AND REDISCOVERY OF THE
U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE:
RESHAPING “NORTHEAST ASIA” BEYOND THE BORDER**

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What is Northeast Asia?

To most international relations specialists in Northeast Asia, the U.S. perception of “Northeast Asia” seems confused, lacking in detail, and far removed from the actual facts on the ground. Some tend to confuse Northeast Asia with “East Asia” – a region influenced traditionally by China – and ignore Russia’s presence. It is well-known that the concept of Northeast Asia was created at the beginning of the Cold War as an intentionally targeted area for U.S. foreign policy, complementing Southeast Asia.¹ Both regions were part of a strategic game in which democracies fought against communist states or movements. The former served to aid the U.S. containment policy against the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, while the latter articulated the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) against communism in countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as well as China. As time went on, the two artificially created regions took different paths: Southeast Asia became a substantive entity and ASEAN enlarged its role in the region by inviting its former Cold War foes to become members—this despite Southeast Asian countries sharing little in common in terms of religion, language, history, and ethnicity.

In contrast, Northeast Asian nations have rarely found common ground to build upon, even among “democratic allies” like Japan and South Korea. This is particularly true in politics, but also in trade and economics. There are severe challenges between Japan and China, such as historical distrust, regional rivalry, and security instability that must be overcome. South Korea’s ties with China, though relatively better than its relations with Japan, are often tested by historical disputes regarding the national “ancestors” (such as the kingdom of Koguryo, or the Bohai people). But contemporary challenges also abound: North Korea’s Stalinist regime remains a troubling security issue for the region and beyond, while Russia’s presence in Northeast Asia has been uncertain since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The only regional forum to discuss security issues has been the Six-Party Talks on North Korean nuclear disarmament, but that process has broken down, and indeed did not achieve any irreversible accomplishments while it was underway. It could be argued that China-Russia relations, which have developed into a strategic partnership since the mid-1990s, are an exceptional case, but the partnership, often interpreted as a counter-balance against the U.S.-Japan alliance, seems to hinder security cooperation among regional players. In short, though there was a small wave of enthusiasm for multilateral organization in the immediate wake of the Cold War, little progress is seen throughout “Northeast Asia.”

In Washington, the term “East Asia” is used more often than “Northeast Asia.” The concept of “East Asia” in the policy and intellectual circles of the capital is overly Sino-centric and seemingly ignores the presence and influence of Russia and, to some extent, Japan. U.S.-China relations are often assumed or stated to be the basis of “East Asia,” though the U.S.-China-Japan triangle is sometimes discussed.² But Russia is

¹ See, Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 21-29.

² See, Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, *The US-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right through 2020*

resurgent, with abundant energy resources and a strategic relationship with China. Redefinition of the term “Northeast Asia” to automatically include Russia is an urgent task.³

Rapid globalization and geopolitical transformation of the world also requires that we reconsider our previous image of “Northeast Asia.” In the post-Cold War period, particularly after “9/11,” the uniqueness of the U.S. has become clearer. The U.S. has a geopolitical advantage over “East Asian” or “Northeast Asian” countries. The direct security of the U.S. homeland is, on one hand, absolutely safe from any occurrence that remains confined within the region (thanks mostly to the end of the Soviet “threat”), and, on the other hand, it remains the only superpower capable of projecting its power across borders and regions to protect its interests not only in “Northeast Asia” but also elsewhere in the world at a moment’s notice.

In turn, China and Russia have seemingly dominated the northeastern half of the Eurasian continent,⁴ which includes neighboring Mongolia, Central Asia, and South and West Asia. They have been closely tied with Eurasian conflicts and have rarely distanced

(Washington DC: CSIS Report, 2007). This report is well-known but does have its weaknesses; mostly, it underestimates Russia’s influence while overemphasizing economic as well as democratic values. Although I agree with the report’s advocacy for up-grading the U.S.-Japan alliance, the reasoning for it is not very persuasive (partly because it makes light of on-going regional cooperation, including China). As will be mentioned later, overdependence on shared values between the U.S. and Japan is not enough, and is rather risky. A better foundation on which to build U.S.-Japan relations could be explored in other ways.

³ When we discuss Northeast Asia, it is natural to cover the two Koreas, Taiwan, and also Mongolia. This article focuses on the U.S., China, Russia, and Japan for the following reasons. First, reviewing too many states in a small picture confuses the general purpose of the present analysis. The pentagon and hexagon models, more than the quadrangle for state relations (discussed below), are hardly understood at a glance. In turn, when we successfully identify the triangle’s logic in a quadrangle (a fourth country should be counted-in for reviewing an outsider’s effect toward the triangle), it is easy to develop the model toward other countries. In this sense, the analysis may be applied in the future to other quadrangles which may include South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Vietnam, or any other country. Second, most of the precedent studies on Northeast Asia focused on the triangle, Russia (Soviet)-U.S.-China and some on U.S.-China-Japan. Adopting a similar alignment would be necessary for testing any model, which I propose. A third and disputable reason is that Taiwan and the two Koreas are yet to become fully independent factors in the region in comparison with the four countries. Taiwan is well-known as a state unrecognized by most countries in the world though it has a de-facto political and economic substance as if it were a state. North Korea is more recognized from the international point of view though the U.S. and Japan have yet to fully accept it in a juridical sense. More vulnerable points for North Korea are its “failed state” economic crisis, for which it has sought economic assistance through the unusual method of unilateral nuclear development, breaking the NPT, and its reputation as a kind of “terrorist sponsoring state” with a history of conducting abductions overseas and terrorist attacks against airplanes and leaders of other states. South Korea should be included in the analysis. After democratization in the late 1990s, South Korea is a Northeast Asian regional power. Nevertheless, the existence of North Korea hinders the reach of South Korea’s power as its foreign policy is held captive to the problems derived from the north; this reality often affects Seoul’s relations with China.

⁴ The concept of Eurasia has a two-fold meaning. The “Eurasian” continent consists of Europe and Asia in a geographic sense while a narrow definition of “Eurasia” only covers the former Soviet Republics. For this paper, I prefer the term “in-between.” Current events in the former Soviet states should be analyzed with its neighboring zones, considering the interactions and interrelations between them. Therefore, I sometimes use the term “Eurasia” as a rather functional concept that includes the former Soviet states plus its surrounding areas.

themselves from any occurrence in the region. However, in the post-Cold War period, Eurasian relations have changed in a number of significant ways; most importantly, China and Russia have overcome their long and shared history of animus and struggle over their long border. The border region, once a source of conflict, is now a zone of cooperation. With the help of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the cooperative zone is widening beyond the Sino-Russian borderland toward the neighboring regions in Eurasia.

Japan's geographic positioning looks to be in-between. Looking at a map, Japan appears to be a natural sea power in the Pacific Rim region, but Japan is also historically intertwined with the Eurasian landmass, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Cold War, Japan's security role was fixed to the U.S.-Japan alliance, to combat the spread of communism in the region. It is true that Japan, until this year the world's second-largest economy, is expected to take a greater role in or beyond the region following the end of the Cold War. Japan has long struggled to identify its position, partly owing to constitutional limitations on dispatching SDF overseas. But it has begun to take some steps toward increasing its security role; Japan's controversial dispatch of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) troops to Iraq, its contentious refueling mission in support of U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan, and other activities in Eurasia point to Japan's greater role in the international arena. Nevertheless, internal political dynamics, historical distrust, and challenges from such Northeast Asian regional neighbors as China, Korea, and Russia make the process of Japan clarifying its role more complicated.

Challenges to the “old” perception of the Northeast Asian balance of power

Conventional wisdom holds that a traditional “balancing” motive is the primary driving force behind the interactions of the four powers in this study: Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. Particularly, the U.S.-Japan-China triangle could be discussed along these lines, even if close attention is paid to the two Koreas and other regional powers.⁵ A U.S.-China-Russian triangle is also often looked at on both global and regional levels, such as in Central Asia.⁶ Is it persuasive to analyze the four powers' cooperation or competition only through the lens of a balance of power, in which the four shift their positions and alliances to protect or advance their interests at the expense of their

⁵ As examples, see, Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007); Masahiro Matsumura, “The Japanese State Identity as a Grand Strategic Imperative,” CNAPS Visiting Fellow Working Paper, May 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/05_japan_matsumura.aspx.

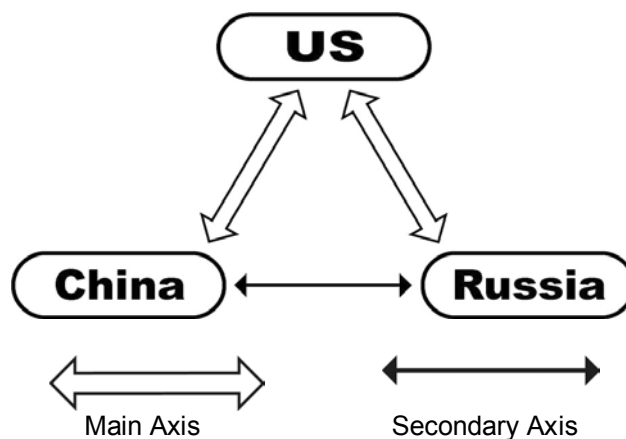
⁶ See, Sherman W. Garnett (ed.), *Rapprochement or Rivalry?: Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon: Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations Since the Eighteenth Century* (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2004); Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partner: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2004); Ariel Cohen (ed.), *Eurasia in Balance: the US and the Regional Power Shift* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao, *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2007). As well as English journals and articles, Russian and Chinese monographs have discussed the topic.

adversaries? Is it actually possible for the characteristics of the four powers to be fully explained by simplifying the four as actors in a strategic billiards game?

Many analyses of triangular relations begin with U.S.-Soviet-China relations in the late-Cold War era. After the Sino-Soviet military conflicts in the late 1960s and the U.S.-China reconciliation in the early 1970s, the triangle approach to international relations became more entrenched in Asia – owing to China’s independence and increased presence – than in Europe where the U.S.-Soviet bipolar confrontation was dominant.⁷ In the 1980s, as new actors such as economic powerhouses Germany and Japan were brought into the game,⁸ and in the 1990s just following the end of the Cold War, placing actors in triangle and even quadrangle diagrams gained in popularity.⁹

Since the 1990s, most analysts have conceptualized the U.S.-China-Russia triangle on the basis of “romantic images” that have become conventional wisdom, as pictured below.

Figure 1: U.S.-China-Russia relations



⁷ William. E. Griffith, *Peking, Moscow, and Beyond: The Sino-Soviet-American Triangle* (Washington D.C.: CSIS, 1973); Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *Sino-Soviet Conflict in the 1970s: Its Evolution and Implication for the Strategic Triangle*, (Rand Report, Santa Monica, 1978); Richard K. Ashley, *The Political Economy of War and Peace: The Sino-Soviet-American Triangle and the Modern Security Problematique* (London: F. Pinter, 1980); Donald.R. Shanor, *The Soviet Triangle: Russia’s Relations with China and the West in the 1980s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980).

⁸ Raju G. C. Thomas (ed.), *The Great-Power Triangle and Asian Security* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1983); Kenneth G. Weiss, *The Strategic Triangle and Sino-Soviet Crises*, (Dissertation, The John Hopkins University, 1989).

⁹ Michael. Mandelbaum (ed.), *The Strategic Quadrangle: Russia, China, Japan, and the United States in East Asia* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1995); Joseph.S. Nye, Kurt Biedenkopf and Motoo Shiina, *Global Cooperation after the Cold War: A Reassessment of Trilateralism* (New York: Trilateral Commission, 1991); Margarita M. Balmaceda (ed.), *On the Edge: Ukrainian-Central European-Russian Security Triangle* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000); Jan Hallenberg and Håkan Karlsson (eds.), *Changing Transatlantic Security Relations: Do the US, the EU and Russia Form a New Strategic Triangle?* (London: Routledge, 2006).

In the 1990s, both China and Russia considered the U.S. to be the most important power in relation to themselves. Therefore, as illustrated in the diagram, Russia-China relations are on a secondary axis that is easily influenced by Russia-U.S. or China-U.S. relations. The better the latter relationship becomes, the worse the former becomes, and vice versa. This kind of interpretation of the triangle suggests that the Sino-Russian axis can work as a counter-balance against the U.S. But is this actually true?

In short, no; this interpretation is easily dismissed. For instance, take the events of 9/11 and its impact on China-Russia relations. After 9/11, even if it were for a short period, both U.S.-China relations and U.S.-Russia relations were improved as a result of cooperation against the Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001. If the above-mentioned interpretation were true, Sino-Russian relations should have deteriorated. In fact this did not happen and rather a sort of Sino-Russian “romance” went forward without interruption.¹⁰ Does this mean the Sino-Russian axis had taken precedence over U.S.-China/U.S.-Russia relations? The answer is probably no. Many analysts point out the lingering challenges of Sino-Russian relations even if they have improved since the 1990s. The conventional explanation of the triangle, clearly drawing from interactions of an actor in the strategic game of billiards without consideration for its geopolitical character and probably influenced by the traditional approach of “balance of power,” does not necessarily suit the current situation.

On the other hand, evidence from the neighboring U.S.-India-Russia triangle could tell a different story. Within this triangle, Russian and Indian relations probably fit the concept of a “balance” game. During the rivalry between the U.S. and Soviet Union over South Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, Russia was not allied with India; Russia never supported India unilaterally and balanced its position between India and Pakistan to maintain its interests against the U.S. In the 1950s when Pakistan joined SEATO and the Baghdad Pact under the auspices of the U.S., the Soviet Union sought to weaken U.S. influence in South Asia. Nikita Khrushchev supported India’s position on Kashmir (that it belonged to India), which brought India closer to the Soviet Union, and then proposed to offer Pakistan economic aid and atomic technology for peaceful use in order to make a rapprochement with Pakistan. In the 1960s, the Soviet Union revised its complete support for India on the Kashmir issue (while still backing India’s position, the Soviet Union now believed the question should be negotiated between the concerned parties) and signed a barter trade agreement with Pakistan. In 1965, Pakistan’s president visited Moscow and Premier Kosygin, as a show of goodwill, and organized the “Tashkent meeting” to mediate between India and Pakistan.¹¹ At least until the China factor influenced the

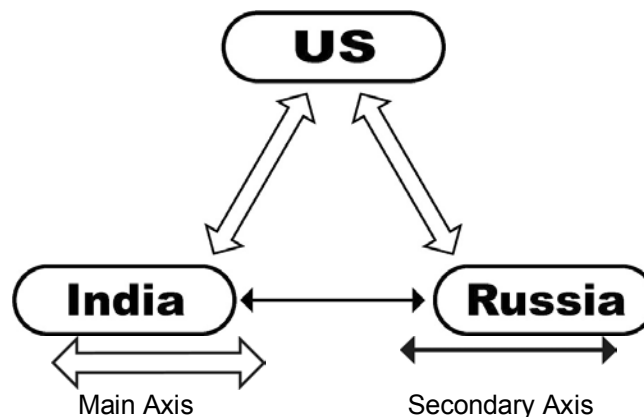
¹⁰ In fact, bilateral relations were neither disturbed nor worsened. In addition to border stability and cooperation, economic relations gradually developed from \$8 billion in 2000 to \$17.7 billion in 2001. Russian arms sales to China and energy talks over Siberia were also on track. The Russo-Chinese treaty of 2001 provided the basis for further cooperation, and was not much influenced by outside factors. President Vladimir Putin, just after his meeting with Jiang Zemin in June 2002, praised Russo-Chinese relations, “Recent improvements in Russo-U.S. relations never ignore the Russo-Chinese one since the latter has reached a higher level than the former because of the existence of a friendship treaty.”

¹¹ A certain amount of studies on the Russo-Indian relationship can be easily found, with most of them

triangle, particularly affecting the Soviet Union and India after the late 1960s, Soviet-Indian relations were far from an “alliance.”

After the end of the Cold War, particularly as China-Russia relations (and, to a certain extent, China-India relations) were improved, Russia-India relations lost the energy which had allowed them to jointly balance against a third party such as China. Current Russia-India relations look much as if it were still the 1950s and 1960s. Russia especially likes to cook up the Russia-India ties as a “counterbalance” against the U.S., but both Russia and India in fact look eagerly toward the U.S. rather than toward each other. Some argue that Russia-India relations are influenced by the U.S.-Russian or U.S.-Indian ties. The better the latter becomes, the worse the former becomes, and vice versa. The “balance” game does make sense for this triangle.¹²

Figure 2: U.S.-India-Russia relations



What accounts for the difference between the two triangles? The important thing is that India and Russia’s positions respectively are different from China and Russia’s

focused on the “balance” between the U.S. and Russia over South Asia in the first period of the Cold War. See, William. J. Barnds, *India, Pakistan, and the Great Powers* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Robert H. Donaldson, *Soviet Policy toward India: Ideology and Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Richard. B. Remnek, *Soviet Scholars and Soviet Foreign Policy: A Case Study in Soviet Policy towards India* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1975); Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Soviet-Asian Relations in the 1970s and Beyond : An Interperceptual Study*, (New York: Praeger, 1976); Stephen Clarkson, *The Soviet Theory of Development : India and the Third World in Marxist-Leninist Scholarship*, (London: Macmillan, 1979); Rajan Menon, *India and Soviet Union : A Case Study of Inter-nation Influence* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1979); Robert C. Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations: Issues and Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1982; Hafeez Malik, *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); V. D. Chopra (ed.), *Studies in Indo-Soviet Relations* (New Delhi: Centre for Regional Affairs, 1986); S. Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear : Story of Indo-Soviet Relations* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1986); Peter J.S. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India* (London: Routledge, 1988); Sanjay Gaikwad, *Dynamics of Indo-Soviet Relations: The Era of Indira Gandhi* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1990).

¹² For details of the “balance nature” of Russia-India relations since the Gorbachev period onward, see Akihiro Iwashita, “Russia and South Asia: Power Balance and Border Dynamism,” Hiroshi Kimura (ed.), *Russia’s Shift toward Asia* (Tokyo: The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2007).

positions in the previous triangle. India is geographically far from Russia and has no shared border, which could raise challenges in bilateral relations. Russia and India are rarely antagonistic toward each other, but are only able to cooperate when there is strong need to do so. In this sense, India seems to offer a perfect partner when Russia feels the need to “balance” a third party, and vice versa. Then, Russian positioning toward India is similar to a “free” actor’s such as the U.S. All of the actors in the Russia-U.S.-India triangle are even with each other in a geopolitical sense, making it possible for each actor to enjoy a “balance” game in the triangle without careful consideration of the bilateral challenges coming from its geopolitical positioning. In short, a country which does not share the borderlands with another has no basic concerns for its own security and interests.

In contrast to the U.S.-India-Russia case, most of the challenges in the U.S.-China-Russia triangle come from geopolitical factors, namely, the existence of a borderland: energy competition, migration, and the potential (however remote) for China to make a territorial claim over the Russian Far East. In this sense, the China-Russia axis should be differentiated from the U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia axes. The border determinant can also influence the “borderless” triangles such as the U.S.-India-Russia triangle. For example, the 1969 Sino-Russian border conflict following the 1962 Sino-Indian border war deprived Russia of a “free hand” in South Asia and fixed it to India against Pakistan.

Borders as a determinant for reshaping the region

Then, what kind of geopolitical aspect should we find in an interaction among actors mainly regulated by the existence of a borderland? How could we incorporate it in a triangle or a quadrangle depicting international relations?

This article, paying considerable attention to China, an inevitable “competitor” or “cooperator” with the U.S., aims to put Japan and Russia as well as China properly within a geopolitical space. I express these dynamics here by re-conceptualizing “Northeast Asia” as “greater Northeast Asia.” In short, the article aims to reshape the concept of “Northeast Asia.” I do this by expanding the concept of Eurasia and re-positioning the U.S. as a super actor and virtual neighbor (at least in the global strategic sense) in the region.

For that purpose, I introduce, first in Section I, the emerging border dynamism in Eurasia, which had begun in the former Sino-Soviet border area in the early 1990s. The geopolitical nature of state-to-state relations should never be underestimated in this area. After illustrating a typical Eurasian quadrangle consisting of China, Russia, the U.S., and India, I describe a “Northeast Asian” quadrangle in which Japan is included. Then, I clarify Japan’s ambivalent position between the U.S. and China or Russia in the “Northeast Asian” quadrangle.

In Section II, I review important current topics to test my hypothesis in a functional triangle model with geopolitical considerations, shown in Section I, to make

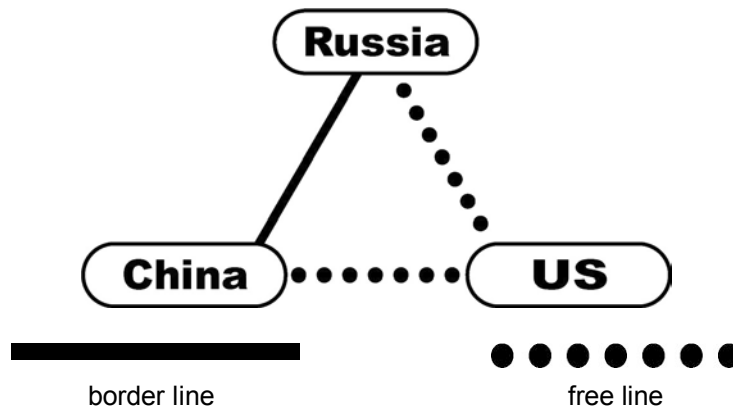
the essential points more apparent for strategic implication in a “greater Northeast Asia.” From these analyses, it’s possible to suggest some of the long-term orientations for the U.S.-Japan alliance over Eurasia and short-term policy advocacy for strengthening the alliance for the mutual benefit of all the concerned parties in “Northeast Asia” and beyond.

Geopolitical quadrangles: borderland politics of Eurasia

Basic models: border and “free” ties

Two distinct types of relationship lines are required to better understand the specifics of the U.S.-China-Russia triangle. This more accurate triangle diagram, highlighting the impact on the triangle by the existence of bordering land (rather than attempting to judge the strength of a certain relationship) and its difference from the U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations, would be the following:

Figure 3: Nature of Russia-China-U.S. ties

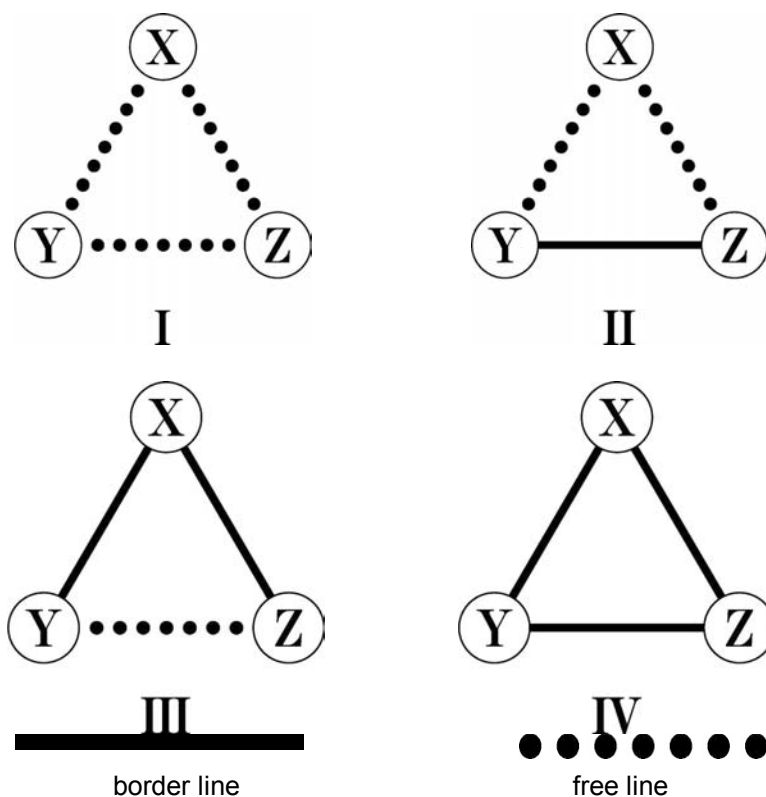


The solid line represents the border politics that regulate relations while the dotted line represents a kind of “freedom” within the relations.

From evidence of the China-Russia-India relations on Eurasia as mentioned in the Introduction, I draw four models consisting of two types of lines: border axes (solid lines) and free axes (dotted lines) in a new geopolitical analysis.¹³ My premise is that a border axis is independent and stronger than a free axis. The free axis could present the possibility of a free hand for the actor, but it would be influenced by the border axis within the triangle and other axes or factors outside the triangle.

¹³ For the details on the model, see Akihiro Iwashita, “Primakov Redux? Russia and the ‘Strategic Triangles’ in Asia,” Akihiro Iwashita (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia, Vol. 1 Russia and Its Neighbors in Crisis* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007).

Figure 4: Basic models of geopolitical triangles

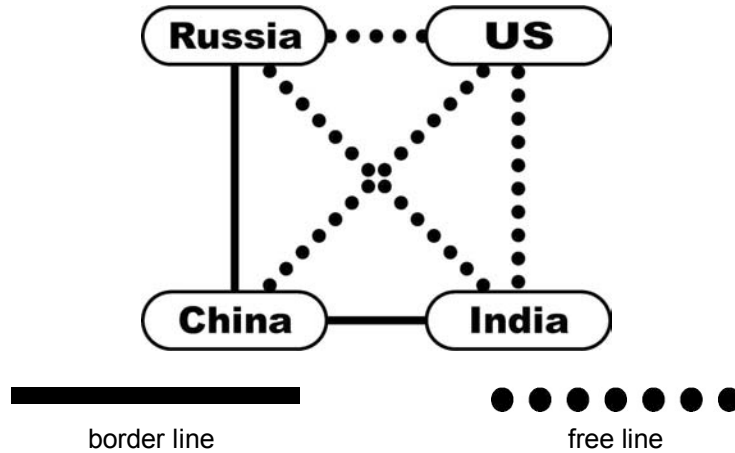


In Type I, the X, Y and Z parties are even and each can enjoy a free hand within the triangle for its own interests. In Type II, the Y-Z border axis has gravity. X could enjoy a balanced approach toward Y and Z. If a zero-sum game is in play, the Y-Z axis will likely play against the interests of X. In short, X is attempting to keep the Y-Z axis down for its own benefit, while Y and Z tend to improve their bilateral relationship (defusing border problems and turning the border region into a peaceful and prosperous area) for their individual benefits. In Type III, the triangle is more heavily regulated by border politics. Here, the Y-Z axis has more freedom than the other two axes. When either the X-Y or the X-Z axis is down, the Y-Z axis is up. If both X axes are down, it might encourage Y and Z to form “allied” relations. Then, X would be out, rushing to seek a stronger actor outside of the triangle. The important thing is that the triangle’s stability and development depends on the X-Y and X-Z axes, not on the Y-Z axis. Type III is much more difficult to manage in comparison with Types I and II. From Type IV we can infer that all axes between the three actors are border axes. Type IV is the case of the Central Eurasian region, particularly strongly regulated by the complicated border locations, such as the relationships among Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and various Central Asian borders.¹⁴

¹⁴ In the case of the Central Asian triangle, see Akihiro Iwashita, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Beyond a Miscalculation on Power Games,” in Christopher Len, Uyama Tomohiko, and Hirose Tetsuya, eds., *Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead*, Central Asia-Caucasus

These triangles can facilitate analysis, and by combining triangles we can move beyond the classic triangles mentioned before. For example, the various triangles among the U.S., China, Russia, and India can become a quadrangle:

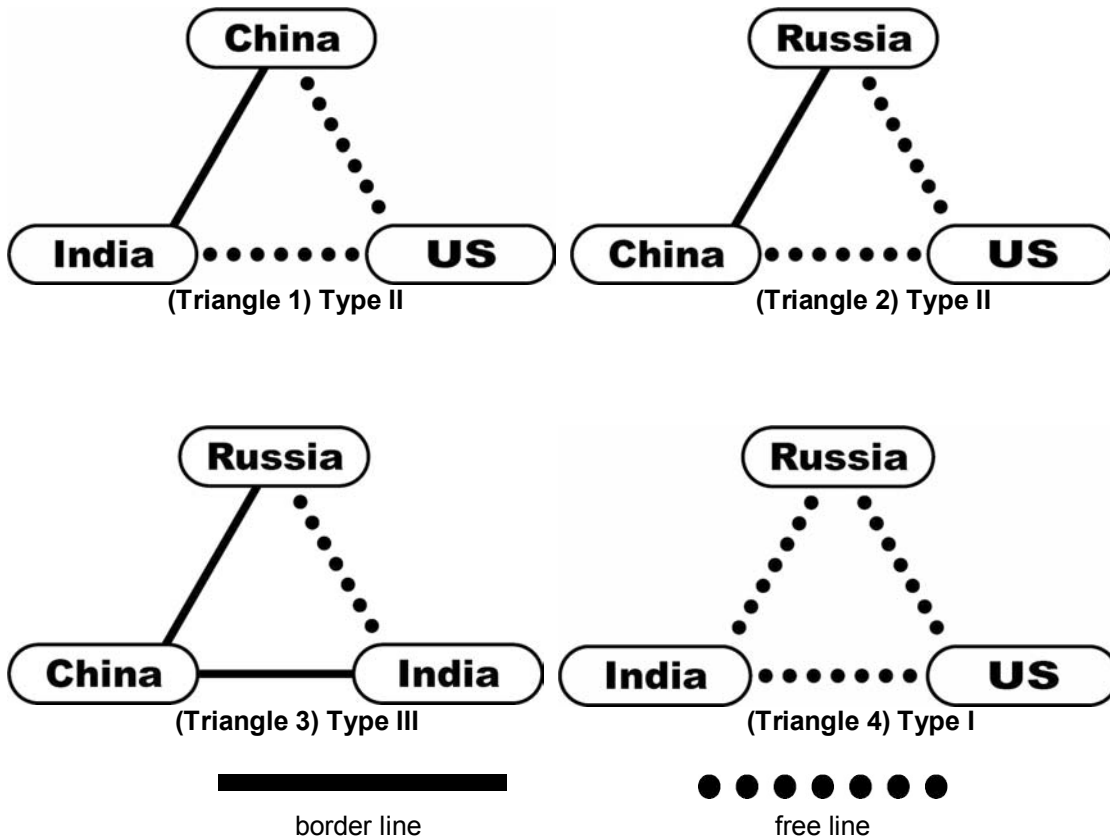
Figure 5: Eurasian quadrangle: U.S.-China-Russia-India



At a glance, the quadrangle is strongly influenced by China, which shares border axes with two of the other three parties, and is the sole border axis for those two. This combination is formed by four separate triangles:

Institute & Silk Road Studies Program (Institute for Security and Development Policy), Washington/Stockholm, 2008; pp. 69-85.

Figure 6: Components of the Eurasian quadrangle



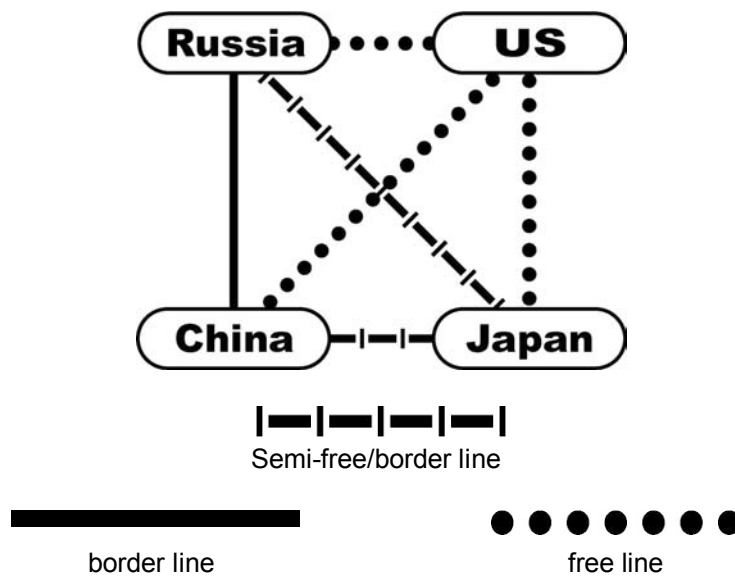
While China appears to have strong influence, the U.S. also holds an advantageous position within the triangles. The U.S. can take advantage of a “balance” policy toward both Russia-China (Triangle 2) and China-India (Triangle 1). On the other hand, China, Russia and India are inherently conditioned to improve their border relations with neighbors for their own interests to deter the U.S. “balance” game. Particularly, China, double locked by the border axes, has a strong motivation to stabilize its borders vis-à-vis the U.S. approach. In turn, as the Russia-China or China-India axes improve, it could diminish the U.S.’s free hand. In the Cold War, China was pressed on its borders by both Russia and India (shown in Triangle 3), fighting brief shooting wars with each, and then rushed out of the triangle to invite the U.S. in at the expense of its two neighbors. Interestingly, the current prevailing trends toward an upsurge of border arrangements, including confidence building measures and the finalization of disputes in the region, could result in China having more of a “free” hand toward the U.S. However, India doesn’t appear to be following the path set out by China. Triangle 4 shows India’s even position in the Russia-U.S.-India triangle. This structure might cause India to place more emphasis on the Russia-U.S.-India triangle and to push away from the Russia-China-India triangle, as was the case with China.

From the analysis above, some useful observations could be drawn from the U.S.-China-Russia triangle: 1) China is destined to be involved by the existence of a border. In case of an emergency with a neighbor, China would be obliged to maintain good ties with distant powers to offset the pressure from the neighboring country. In turn, if China could lessen the burden of its border, China's positioning in the triangle or quadrangle would be improved. This dynamic provides reasoning for China's clearly demonstrated will to quickly resolve border disputes around its periphery.¹⁵ 2) China's defusing the main border challenge, i.e., enhancement of the Sino-Russian relations, could be easily understood as a counteraction against the U.S., even if China would not aim to collide with the U.S. This is because improvement of China-Russia border relations would suggest the U.S.'s loss of structural advantage within the China-Russia-U.S. triangle. This loss of advantage is the reason why many U.S. analysts are inclined to over-emphasize the Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

Japan "in-between" in Northeast Asia

For the purpose of analysis, Japan can also be placed within a Northeast Asian quadrangle. In considering sea borders around Japan, off Eurasia, it's necessary to prepare one more line, illustrated by a semi-dotted line to indicate a semi-free or semi-border axis.

Figure 7: Northeast Asian quadrangle: U.S.-China-Japan-Russia



¹⁵ On China's overall border achievements, see the contributions of Taylor Fravel and Neville Maxwell. M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation," *International Security* 30, no. 2 (fall 2005); Neville Maxwell, "How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict was Finally Settled: From Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969," Akihiro Iwashita (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia, Vol. 2, Russian and Its Eastern Edge* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007).

This axis has a two-fold meaning. First, it can represent an existent border between two countries that is neither substantive nor decisive for state-to-state relations, or it can illustrate a small and minor land border or sea border. In Japan's case, it makes some sense. Why have Japan-Russia border disputes, e.g., the Northern Territories, remained unresolved for such a long time? Why have the contentious Japan-China and Japan-Korea border disputes, e.g., "Senkaku/Diaoyu" or "Takejima/Dokdo," been continually pushed aside? Indeed, it has been long argued that unless the "Northern Territories" issue and other festering political obstacles are resolved, the economic development of Russo-Japanese bilateral relations will remain a pipe dream. Factually, however, territorial issues were not necessarily an obstacle for developing state-to-state relations for Japan as was illustrated by the development of Japan-China and Japan-Korea relations despite the "Senkaku/Diaoyu" and "Takejima/Dokto" island disputes.

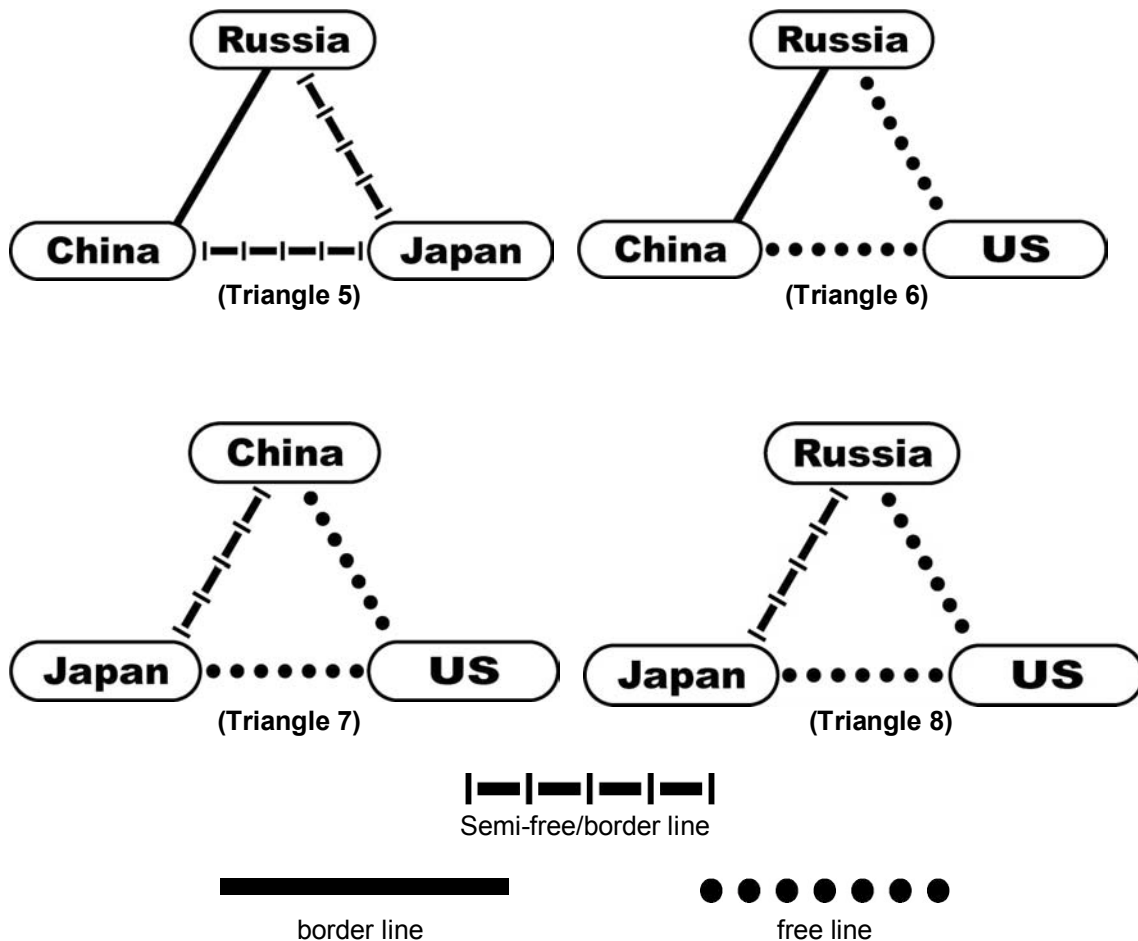
When Japanese businesses want to pursue their interests overseas they certainly do so, as they did unofficially with mainland China in the 1960s and are doing with Taiwan today. Conventional wisdom has it that Japan cannot strengthen ties with Russia owing mainly to territorial issues. Rather, the opposite may be true. For various reasons, Japan has used this issue as a convenient pretext for not improving relations (particularly during the Cold War period). It should be noted that the border issue is not a decisive issue for Japan (or for the Soviet Union/Russia). Both countries seem to have little inclination to press for a resolution. Even during the Cold War, Russia was not necessarily an archenemy of Japan and vice versa. Unlike the Sino-Soviet borderland, the border around the "Northern Territories" has never faced a possible war. The area has enjoyed a kind of "peace" since the end of the Second World War, though collisions over fisheries are, unfortunately, a common occurrence.¹⁶ To briefly reiterate, it seems the Japan-Russia border disputes are not as crucial for bilateral relations as we imagined, and factually not heavily regulate the relationship – unlike the role that the border plays in the China-Russia relationship. Thus, the Japan-Russia axis can be characterized as "semi-free."

Second, in addition to this type of existent but inconsequential or minor border, this type of line can represent the virtual nature of a transposable border. In the case of two countries which have a shared but short border, the situation easily changes. Although relations could be influenced by border politics to a certain extent while playing a balancing game, border politics play less of a decisive factor in determining the direction of relations.

The semi-border, semi-free line has two variable functions within a triangle. When it is put together with a border line, its "semi-free" aspects might be more prominently displayed. But when put together with a free line the "semi-border" aspect of the line become more prominent. A breakdown of the triangles is as follows:

¹⁶ On the full story of the Northern Territories Issue, see Akihiro Iwashita, *Hopporyodo Mondai: 4-demo 0-demo 2-demo naku* [Northern Territorial Issues: Neither Four nor Zero, nor Two] (Chuokoron-shinsha: Tokyo, 2005).

Figure 8: Components of the Northeast Asian quadrangle



Interestingly, all the triangles are Type II and quasi-Type II. Japan basically has an advantageous position in Triangle 5 as the U.S. does with China and Russia in Triangle 6. However, when the U.S. is put in the triangles with Japan, Japan's position appears similar to China's or Russia's (as shown in Triangles 7 or 8). It hints that the U.S. enjoys a more advantageous position than Japan in other triangles because of lack of U.S. concerns about the border at the regional theater. For a quasi-Type II triangle, I categorize the "semi-free" aspect of the line (Triangle 5) and the "semi-border" aspect of the line (Triangle 7 or 8). The triangles clearly show Japan's in-between or ambivalent position in the Northeast Asian quadrangle. As the "free" line relations illustrate, the U.S. and Japan share similar positions vis-à-vis both Russia and China. In addition, the U.S. could use the China or Russian card against Japan if necessary. This suggests a potential contradiction between the U.S. and Japan in geopolitical terms regardless of the existence of the US-Japan alliance. Would-be U.S.-Japan tension in Northeast Asia is explored here.

However, positive border dynamics, having appeared in Eurasia, lead us to a different reality. Most border issues have subsided and areas with past border disputes are rapidly stabilizing. Having gotten through the challenges caused by the border

demarcation works of the 1990s and Chinese migration in the Russian Far East, Sino-Russian relations are evolving into a different level in comparison with the past. China and Russia successfully handled the migration problem in the late 1990s and resolved all bilateral border disputes by 2004. Thanks in no small part to the stability and development of the border area, the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership, declared in 1996, is recognized as the “best in the history,” though some challenges remain in such fields as energy and security. Border stability and development, so far, give both Russia and China incentives to enhance the interests of the other vis-à-vis Japan or the U.S., which had previously enjoyed a “free” hand toward both of them.¹⁷

For the U.S., improved Eurasian border dynamics has both benefits and disadvantages. While the U.S. maintains its “free” hand with Russia, China, and Japan, it could align with any partner on the basis of specific individual interests. On the other hand, Russian and Chinese “freedom” in the new quadrangle is increased. Russia and China could offset the U.S.’s advantageous position toward them by taking advantage of their improved and stable relations.

For both China and Russia, the new alignment undoubtedly is desirable. This is one of the most important reasons why both have emphasized the “Sino-Russian strategic partnership,” even if both lack the will or capability to make it a reality against the U.S.

However, the change in the Northeast Asian quadrangle implies a double challenge for Japan. First, the new quadrangle would undermine the basis of the U.S.-Japan alliance that balances Russia and China (by giving the U.S. more free positioning). Second, Japan could simultaneously lose its advantageous position vis-à-vis Russia and China; namely, because of improved Russia-China relations, neither the Russia card against China nor the China card against Russia would function well for Japan’s foreign policy.

How can Japan manage the challenges in Triangle 5 (in Figure 8, page 15)? One of the most beneficial solutions is following the Sino-Russian case for defusing border issues. Currently, Japan faces border dispute issues with both Russia and China. The former is the famous “Northern Territories” issue, and the latter is currently focused on the “Senkaku/Diaoyu” islands and the energy rich seabed surrounding them. The hesitation (or failure) to follow the Eurasian trend of border dynamics might cause huge damage to Japan’s foreign policy. In order to depart from the current “isolationist” approach, it is strongly recommended that the Japanese government endeavor to resolve both border issues by making the necessary compromises.

¹⁷ For a case study of the Sino-Russian deal on the border solution, see Akihiro Iwashita, “An Inquiry for New Thinking on the Border Dispute: Backgrounds of “Historic Success” for the Sino-Russian Negotiations, Akihiro Iwashita, (ed.), *Siberia and the Russian Far East in the 21st Century: Partners in “Community of Asia,” Vol. 1 Crossroads in Northeast Asia* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2005). Border dynamism over Eurasia beyond the Sino-Russian case is mentioned in Akihiro Iwashita, “A New Era of Eurasian Cooperation: Beyond the Sino-Russian Border Disputes,” Adam Eberhardt and Akihiro Iwashita (eds.), *Security Challenges in the Post-Soviet Space* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2007), pp.147-164.

If Japan can improve either the Japan-Russia or Japan-China axis, or both, then Tokyo can develop a more “free” hand in its approach to the other axes.

Getting Japan right

This review indicates ways that the U.S. and Japan could re-coordinate their foreign relations in the transformed quadrangle to redefine their common interests. First, the U.S. should reconsider the current phenomena of border dynamics around Eurasia and seek to reinforce its advantage in the quadrangle. Since China and Russia have freed themselves of the burden of border conflict and are now able to develop a “free” hand toward the U.S. and Japan—even if it does not necessarily equate to Sino-Russian collaboration balancing the U.S.—the U.S. seems to have a stake and qualification for reshaping the meaning of Japan within the structure of the quadrangle.

Most of Japan’s current border challenges originated from the ending of the World War II, and the Treaty of San Francisco which was signed in 1951. After imperially expanding its “sphere of influence” from Micronesia in the south and to Kamchatka and some of the Aleutian Islands in the north, Japan has lost its identified “terrain and sea” that it could control under its sovereignty during the postwar process. The U.S. occupation of Japan’s territory and sea as well as the Soviet control of the northern islands of Japan defined and impacted Japan’s borders. However, the jurisdiction of some islands was open for discussion even after the San Francisco Treaty. The Republic of China (Taiwan) has yet to recognize Okinawa (Ryukyu) officially as a part of Japan, claiming that the decision grant Japan sovereignty over Okinawa was made without any consultation with the ROC (which, along with the People’s Republic of China, was not invited to sign the San Francisco Treaty. This situation destabilizes Japan’s current south sea area bordering with Taiwan, including the Senkaku islands.

At first glance, the territorial dispute over the South Kuril islands would appear to be a bilateral issue between Japan and Russia. The San Francisco Treaty, which the Soviet Union did not sign, was the jurisdictional base for Japan to renounce of its claim over the Kuril islands—but Japan defines four islands, Kunashir, Etorofu, Habomai, and Shikotan, as belonging to the South Kuril and therefore not covered in the San Francisco Treaty. The U.S. rejected Japan’s claims over Kunashir and Etorofu at the beginning. However, in the mid-1950s Secretary of State John Foster Dulles suggested that the U.S. might not return Okinawa to Japan if the package deal on “returning two islands (Habomai and Shikotan) with the peace treaty” between Japan and the Soviet Union were realized. Factually, at that time Japan had almost accepted the Soviet proposal on receiving Habomai and Shikotan only and giving up Kunashir and Etorofu, but after Dulles’s suggestion and some Japanese leaders’ rejection of the deal, Japan’s new policy choice was blockaded. Since then, the U.S., in charge of the Treaty, has changed its interpretation and supports Japan’s claim to Kunashir and Etorofu.¹⁸

¹⁸ See, Kimie Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific: Divided Territories in the San Francisco System*, Routledge, 2007.

Even now, Japan's post-war border process is yet to be finished. The negotiations of course must be conducted on a bilateral basis with China or Russia, but the U.S. is the main concerned party in a historical sense and is the key figure for a responsible alliance with Japan now and in the future. The U.S. should free Japan from the condition that has constrained Japan's foreign policy for a long time. Namely, the festering territorial issues, with at least either China or Russia, or, at best, with both. In turn, if Japan were to overcome the border challenges with China or Russia, it would undoubtedly enhance Japan's foreign policy in and beyond the region. Lifting the border "burden" of Japan's axis toward either China or Russia would help Japan become a more independent power with a "free" hand.

Let us think about the future Japan's foreign policy in/out the quadrangle in the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

As indicated above, a logical question would then be: If Japan is able to implement a more "free" diplomacy vis-à-vis China and Russia, would more tension arise between the U.S. and Japan? From the structural sense, the answer is both "yes" and "no." In each triangle—China-Japan-U.S., China-Japan-Russia, and Russia-Japan-U.S.—with a better baseline relationship with China and Russia, Japan not only strengthens its axes toward these two countries, but toward the U.S. as well. In this case, Japan might show a more assertive attitude toward the U.S. (Which caused great consternation in Washington as former Prime Minister Hatoyama's DPJ-led coalition government attempted to assert itself on the Okinawa-base relocation issue.)

However, is keeping Japan docile and antagonistically but non-freely fixed against China and or Russia in the best interest of the U.S.? In the static world of the Cold War, fixing Japan in the anti-communist camp made some sense. But the post-Cold War world order is changing rapidly, and the previous frozen international power structure does not suit current realities. Catching up with the structural transformations in the triangle as described above, Japan with free handed diplomacy could bring more benefit to the U.S. in the region and over the quadrangle. If the world is smaller and American dominance over the globe is fading, why the U.S. does not use Japan in more a constructive way for the U.S. interests? If containment of China and Russia are no longer goals, what will be the common basis of a redefined U.S.-Japan alliance? Could Japan, after being released from the troublesome border relations with China or Russia, be a reliable partner with the U.S. on new challenges beyond the boundaries of Northeast Asia? These questions will be examined in the next section from a strategic perspective.

Japan's "functions" in Northeast Asia and beyond

Some might emphasize democracy as the bond in a redefined alliance, considering the importance of ideology and values. The democratic ideal (or other ideals) may serve to partially undergird a bilateral relationship, but ideology is not usually enough to sustain an alliance in the long run. Rather, shared interests provide a much stronger rationale. Indeed, countries with opposite ideologies but shared interests, such as the United States and Saudi Arabia, often maintain strong ties.

What kind of common interests, then, can redefine U.S.-Japan relations? If a real national interest-based bond between the two cannot be found, a more independent Japanese Asia policy may put U.S. policy toward the region at risk. In turn, if Japan were to make a push toward greater independence while building up an autonomous regionalism with neighboring Asian powers, the U.S.-Japan alliance could be paralyzed.

On the other hand, a new perspective and an inner motivation behind strengthening U.S.-Japan ties should be explored beyond China, as I mentioned in the Introduction. An axis that relies mainly on a third party, regardless of whether it is a competitor or stakeholder, is always fragile and easily influenced. The U.S.-Japan alliance is still struggling to identify a "borderline" to be truly shared for the national interests of both countries. Getting the U.S. right, not only Japan, in the geopolitical context of the Eurasian continent would lead to better reshaping of the functional triangle shown below.

In this section, I apply some tests for outlining U.S.-Japan common interests basically by using the "romantic triangle"¹⁹ model with its cooperative/competitive function, according to the following issues: regional stability, non-proliferation and defense, and Eurasian cooperation. Even if the geopolitical diagrams on page 10 are not mentioned directly in some of the later cases, border dynamics implicitly work for the analysis of Northeast Asian triangles.

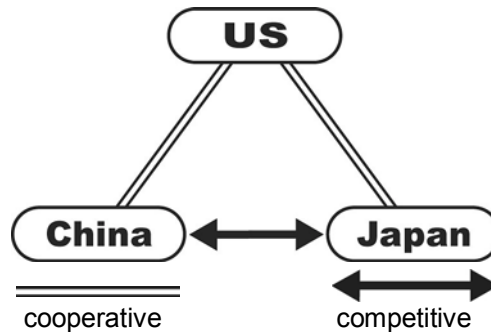
Stability for the region after the Sino-Russian border rapprochement

One of the key common interests between the U.S. and Japan is stability in Northeast Asia. For U.S. foreign policy in general, the Middle East – particularly Palestine and Iran – and South and West Asia – including Afghanistan and Pakistan – are the top-priority regions in the immediate and middle-term future. Since its resources are currently directed elsewhere, the U.S. has little reason to seek to change the status-quo of Northeast Asia right now, though some challenges such as North Korea and even the Taiwan Strait remain potential tinderboxes. For the stability of the region, the Sino-Russian

¹⁹ For the utility of this type of triangle, including the "romantic" one, see Lowell Dittmer, "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis," *World Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4. (July 1981), pp. 485-515. Dittmer categorizes three types of triangles: 1) outside player in someone else's stable marriage, 2) senior partner in a stable marriage, and 3) pivot player in a romantic triangle. My framework on the border/free triangles could explain the reason and background how the U.S. could enjoy each case freely or under what conditions another player, such as the Soviet Union or China, could do so.

rapprochement, based on stabilizing the border area that had long been a cause for catastrophe and military clashes, could be accepted in a more constructive way than the current perception, which again is often to view it as a balance to the U.S.-Japan alliance. If other border disputes, for example Russo-Japan or Sino-Japan disputes, were to follow the Sino-Russian example and apply the lessons learned from their experience, then regional stability will be enhanced.

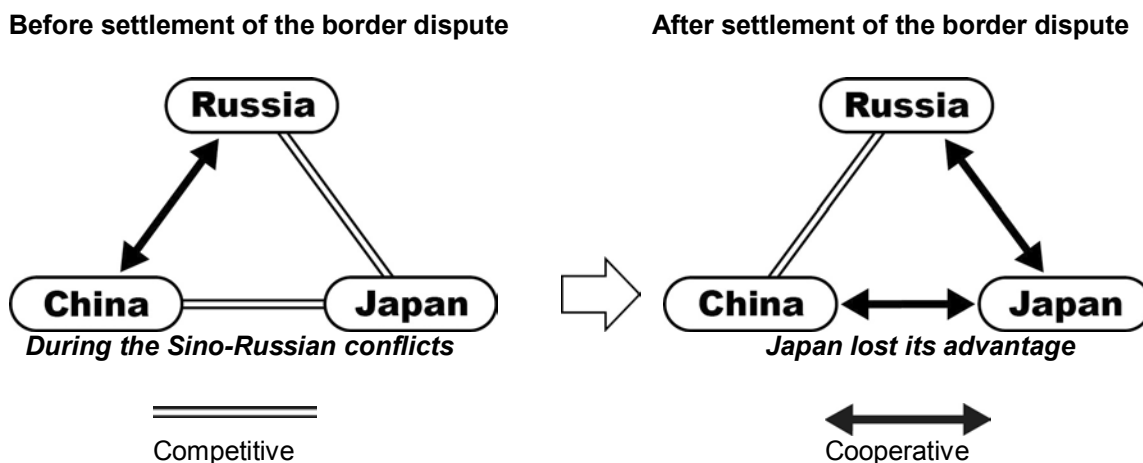
Figure 9: U.S.-China-Japan functional diagram



In qualitative terms, the U.S.-China-Japan functional triangle generally favors the U.S., as its relationships with both China and Japan can generally be classified as “cooperative.” On the other hand, both China and Japan have one “cooperative” axis (the United States) and one “competitive” axis (each other). In this triangle, the U.S. could possibly maximize its interests by taking advantage of regional competition between Japan and China.²⁰ However, at the same time, this dynamic might place a burden on the U.S. to play the role of “mediator” between China and Japan (as it threatened to do near the end of Japan’s Koizumi government in the mid 2000s). This could be particularly true when we look at the geopolitical rivalry currently going on over the sea border and other unresolved disputes, including military build-up issues, energy, historical views, culture gaps and so on, which could add fuel to present and future conflicts. This situation could also apply to the U.S.-Japan-Russia triangle.

²⁰ Of course, other various types of the U.S.-China-Japan functional triangles could be operatively formulated, by positioning the U.S. “free” of the Eurasian continent. This calculation ignores the geopolitical characteristics of both China and Japan; for an analysis based on geopolitical characteristics, see again Matsumura, “The Japanese State Identity as a Grand Strategic Imperative,” pp. 17-25. As Richard Bush of the Brookings Institution notes, the outcome really depends on how the U.S. perception: “1) Does Washington believe that our interests are best secured by promoting a concert of power, in which all three work together for the sake of the system? 2) Does it believe that China will inevitably challenge U.S. and Japanese interests and that the U.S. and Japan must base the policy and the alliance on that reality? 3) Does it think that the safest is to align with China and let Japan be marginalized? 4) Is the best approach to play China or Japan off against each other?” (Private email exchange with the author.)

Figure 10: Russia-China-Japan relations and the China-Russia border dispute

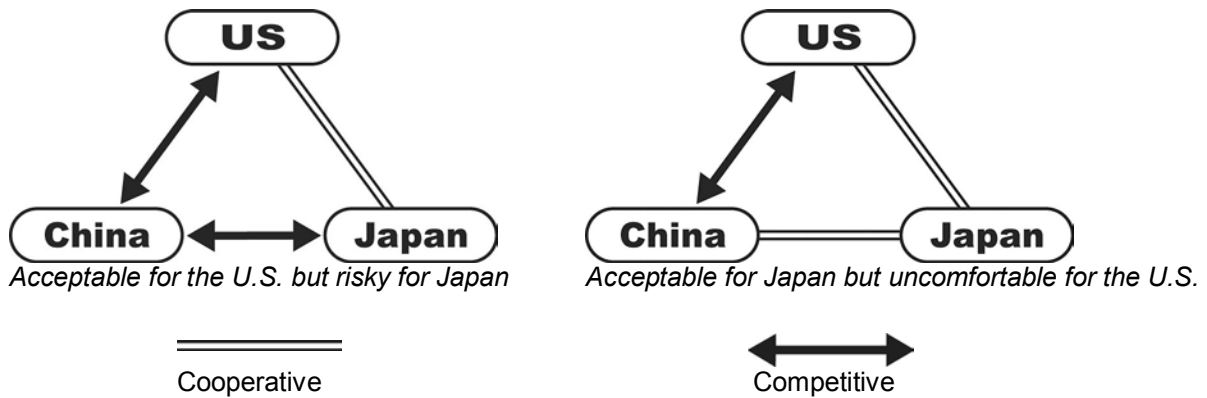


Reshaping the relevant geopolitical diagrams (Figure 7, Triangles 7 and 8, page 15) into more “borderless” situations, resolving (or at least lessening) the Japan-Russia and Japan-China border disputes, which would result in giving Japan more “freedom” in the Japan-China-Russia diagram (Figure 8, Triangle 5, page 15), could create a more stabilized Northeast Asia. It would mitigate any unnecessary involvement by the U.S. in the region and leave more resources, energy, and time for the U.S. to tackle more imminent tasks in the key regions as shown above.

For Japan, what are the implications of more stable relations with its powerful neighbors in the region? Geopolitical differences between Japan and the U.S. over security issues should be reconsidered in a functional triangle. Theoretically, the U.S. can act freely (within the Northeast Asian quadrangle, Figure 7, page 13) toward the Taiwan Strait or the Korean peninsula. If the U.S. were to carry out limited military actions in either location, the U.S. mainland security is guaranteed on the condition of an “understanding” with China or Russia. However, Japan does not enjoy the same physical distance from the Taiwan Strait or the Korean peninsula, and its security is not guaranteed in the event of conflict in either place. Japan’s top priority for security is to avoid any “small” or “tactical” conflict which could deprive Japan of the peaceful conditions necessary for its economic development and stability.²¹ For this reason, Japan, through its alliance with the United States, relied on deterrence vis-à-vis Communist states during the Cold War period.

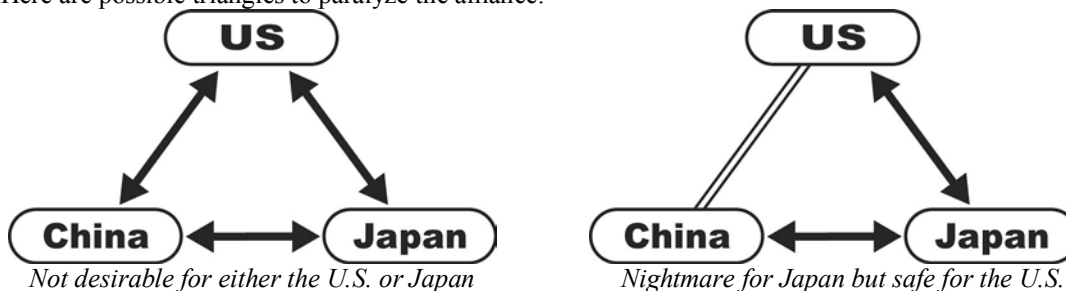
²¹ It is well-known that in Japan's post-war foreign policy the key element has been the alliance with the U.S. for security; thereby Japan has been able to concentrate its energy mainly on economic development and domestic welfare. Even after the Cold War, Japan has maintained this basic policy priority and does not show its assertive and aggressive involvement in military affairs. Akira Irie, *Nihon no Gaiko, [Japan's Diplomacy]*, Chuko Shinsyo, Tokyo, 1966. Tadashi Ariga and others (eds.), *Nihon no Gaiko, [Japan's Diplomacy]*, TokyoDaigaku Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1989.

**Figure 11: Asymmetry of interests between the U.S. and Japan
owing to geopolitical realities**



Maintaining stability in Northeast Asia is Japan’s main strategic interest, even if conditions of the U.S.-Japan security arrangement are transformed. In this sense, keeping the status quo and maintaining regional stability have been more important items on the security agenda for Japan than for the U.S., which as noted above is preoccupied with the Middle East and South and West Asia. Both the U.S. and Japan should now reconfirm the meaning of “stability,” while endeavoring to reach a nuanced understanding of the “status quo” to enjoying their peace and interests in Northeast Asia.²² Clarifying the meaning of “stability” in the region for both countries’ interests is an urgent task, as it would help bridge the gap represented by each country’s geopolitical position. The U.S. should redefine stability in Northeast Asia as a necessary condition for moving forward its policies in other urgent areas. Also, in order to guarantee its interests, Japan should reconfirm its strategic significance while avoiding the pitfalls of “value-oriented” issues with China and the two Koreas which could lead to actions that do not necessarily correspond with Japan’s interests.

²² Here are possible triangles to paralyze the alliance:



Nuclear security in Northeast Asia: finding common interests for peace

A critical problem hindering the common interest of “stability” in the region comes currently from North Korea. This issue is even more complicated than we imagine. Stopping North Korea from developing – and, even worse, proliferating – nuclear weapons is a shared interest among the powers belonging to any triangle within the Northeast Asian quadrangle. Therefore, it is possible to foresee any triangle within the quadrangle becoming an all-plus-sum dynamic. Although it is easy to assume that all four parties may be interested in close collaboration, the real situation is not so simple.

Setting the nuclear issue briefly aside, the very existence of the current North Korean regime is a point of contention within the region. For China, the existence and stability of its immediate neighbor North Korea is indispensable. The two nations may no longer consider each other allies, but Chinese border security requires a stable North Korea, as North Korea acts as a protective buffer for China vis-à-vis the U.S. or future Korean expansion. Russia does not follow the same calculation as China but, as a land neighbor, supports the existence of North Korea and its current regime for many of the same reasons. Thus there is a cooperative axis between Russia and China, though China does not welcome a strong Russian presence in the Korean peninsula.

Japan is in a more complicated position. For Japan, a sea neighbor quite close in proximity to Korea, the desire for stability on the peninsula is absolute. However, the democratization of North Korea appears to be the best option for resolving the abduction issue between the two countries – if this change occurs relatively smoothly and does not deeply affect Japan’s security. The best scenario for Japan is a peaceful change of the regime, which would not destabilize the region.²³ Therefore Japan desires a different end-state for the North Korean regime than do China and Russia.

In this case, the U.S. would enjoy a “free” hand (as shown in the previous section) based on geographic distance. The U.S. does not need to feel any threat from North Korea’s challenge because no outbound immigration from North Korea could reach the U.S. mainland and a couple of possible nuclear missiles does not upset the U.S. strategic dominance (though proliferation of nuclear materials or weapons to terrorists is obviously a major concern). The U.S. may prefer to apply pressure, along with Japan, on North Korea. Or, it could seek to improve ties with North Korea (as both the Bush administration, near the end of its second term, and the Obama administration have tried to do), setting aside Japan’s concerns. Some Japanese argue that if the U.S. were to improve its ties with North Korea and the abduction issue remained unresolved, a possible conflict could arise between the U.S. and Japan. In the event that a softer American approach to North Korea corresponded with China’s or Russia’s approach, then Japan could be isolated within the U.S.-China-Japan-Russia quadrangle. The “in-

²³If we put the reunification issue in the triangle, the analysis becomes more disputable. Frankly speaking, all of the parties, including South Korea, do not want rapid reunification, which could destabilize alignment in Northeast Asia and could undermine its influence over the region. This is a critical factor which could allow North Korea to conduct various policies to save its regime in the region.

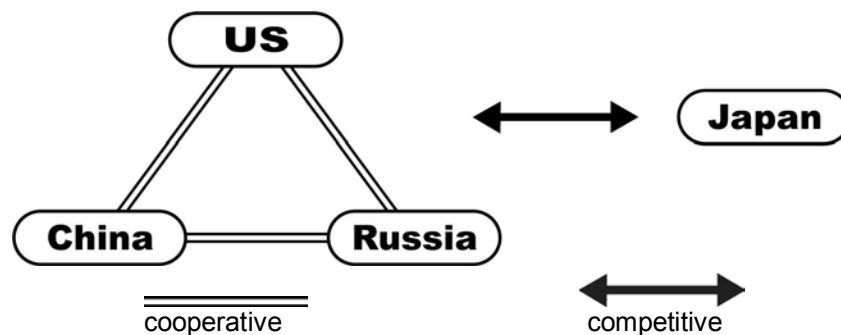
between” geopolitical character of Japan would complicate its positioning with the three powers on North Korean issues.

This description is quite simplified, and it would be in Japan’s best interest to pay more attention to the varied interests of the concerned parties. To wit, China and Russia do not necessarily wish to put a halt to North Korea’s nuclear activities not necessarily because they feel directly threatened by a nuclear North Korea, as is the case with Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. Rather, China and Russia are more concerned that a nuclear North Korea may prompt Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons.

In an illustration of this triangle, Japan is again targeted, with a cooperative axis between China and Russia and competitive axes between China and Japan and between Russia and Japan. Though Japan has long been opposed to the procurement of nuclear weapons, perhaps the decisive factor in maintaining this long-held policy is the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The U.S. therefore could manage, with Russia and China, to contain possible Japanese nuclearization, even if it fails to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula.

To prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, containing Japan’s possible nuclear aspirations (if North Korea becomes an established nuclear power) would be a critical task – and indeed an obligation – for the U.S. It is important to note how a cooperative triangle comprising the U.S., China, and Russia would react to Japan in the quadrangle. Could a 3 vs. 1 formation, a U.S.-China-Russia coalition against Japan, suit U.S. foreign policy in the region? Can we exclude the possibility that Japan would follow in the path of North Korea by developing nuclear weapons even in the face of a blockade enforced by the three other largest powers in Northeast Asia? This scenario seems highly unlikely, but the U.S.-Japan alliance would face some serious challenges if it were to indeed happen. This sort of risk should be removed before it becomes a possibility.

Figure 12: U.S.-China-Russia cooperation against a nuclearizing Japan



Missile defense initiatives from the U.S. may worsen an already complicated situation, as it basically changes the status quo in the region. Further development of the missile defense plan could deprive China of its capability (either real or perceived) of

“deterrence” against the U.S. It could effectively turn China into a “non-nuclear state” vis-à-vis the U.S. as the U.S. would retain the capability to strike China, but China’s nuclear strike capability would be diminished or extinguished. This would place China in a very vulnerable strategic position: could China endure such a situation without military build-up?

Furthermore, despite close collaboration between the U.S. and Japan in developing a missile defense system, it could in fact bring about a serious divergence of interests between the two allies. Even if the system were perceived as effective in defending the U.S. mainland against China’s long-range strategic weapons, it is doubtful that it would have the same efficacy toward a possible attack on a close neighbor by thousands of intermediate-range missiles. For Japan, missile defense does not necessarily promise to be an effective shield as it does for the U.S.

Therefore, missile defense in East Asia could, paradoxically, trigger Japan’s nuclearization rather than preventing it – if the U.S. replaces its traditional nuclear protection of Japan with a missile defense umbrella. As China builds up its capabilities to offset the influence of a missile defense system and Russia follows a similar path, Japan may choose to acquire nuclear weapons regardless of a missile defense umbrella. This would lead the quadrangle back to, at least, a Cold War-like conflict and exhaust the resources of the U.S. by diverting funds that could be used to combat “terrorists” in key regions. The worst case scenario is the U.S. failing to prevent Japan’s nuclear rise—with or without a MD system—and a deterioration of its relations both with China and Russia. In this case, the U.S. would find itself isolated from both China and Russia and its ally, Japan. All-zero-sum models of any triangle are real possibilities. Ironically, Sino-Russian relations would remain intact.

Therefore, stabilizing the region and calming the potential nuclear arms race is critical for the U.S. The U.S.-Japan alliance should be redefined to allow for the establishment of a denuclearized zone on the Korean peninsula or, at least, to search for a manageable “arms-controlled” Northeast Asia community. Though individual interests for security in the region seem to some extent different, the U.S. and Japan share the basis common interests of peace and stability in the region.

If they can be revived (without or without North Korea’s participation, (the Six-Party Talks seek to harmonize each state’s interests for permanent stability in the region. These talks should be built up and developed as a means of putting new items, including missile defense and nuclear arms control, on the coming agenda. Now that serious challenges in the region have been revived, regional security must be cemented. As far as Northeast Asia is concerned, a balancing game is not bad in terms of economics but never good in terms of security. The U.S. and Japan as allied partners should urge both China and Russia to create a “Northeast Asian theater” on the basis of common security interests. With the window of opportunity closing, now is the time to act. Concerning nuclear security, romantic triangles hardly serve to promote the stability and interests of the region, all could win or all could lose.

A game of billiards: Eurasian accommodations for tackling key areas

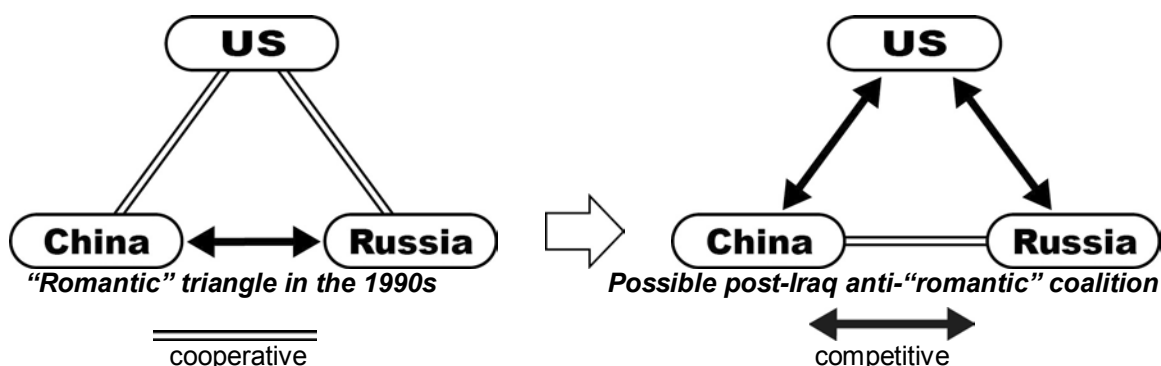
Regardless of Japan becoming nuclearized or not, engaging Japan in the quadrangle will unveil its potential roles in Eurasia. As Japan conducts select missions in Iraq and Afghanistan based on the current DPJ's insistence on a UN mandate with Prime Minister Naoto Kan's thoughtful consideration of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the alliance has yet to find a blueprint for the details of Japan's role there. Indeed, the Eurasian strategic situation currently resembles a grand game of billiards, particularly between Russia, China, and the U.S.

Since the end of the Cold War, the upkeep of relations with the U.S., the only remaining superpower, has been a top foreign policy priority for both China and Russia despite frequent attempts to maintain some maneuverability. Under these conditions, for these countries the simultaneous loss of U.S. ties and ties with each other should be avoided at all costs because of the serious isolation that would result if it were to happen. In the 1990s, the U.S. enjoyed good relations with either China or Russia, although not necessarily with both at the same time. In those days, China and Russia were frustrated by the potential for isolation within the triangle (because neither China nor Russia had full confidence in each other's goodwill or stable relations, as the border questions had not been resolved). Conventional wisdom held that Sino-Russian relations were often easily influenced by the U.S., shedding light only on the functional triangles (the energy and nuclear issues, for example) described above.

However, as Sino-Russian relations were improved with more stable border areas, the cooperative Sino-Russian axis became sustainable. After the end of both romantic periods of the U.S. toward Russia and China in the 1990s and the short honeymoon of the all-plus-sum triangle following the events of 9/11, the Sino-Russian cooperative axis was no longer easily influenced by a third party such as the U.S. or Japan.

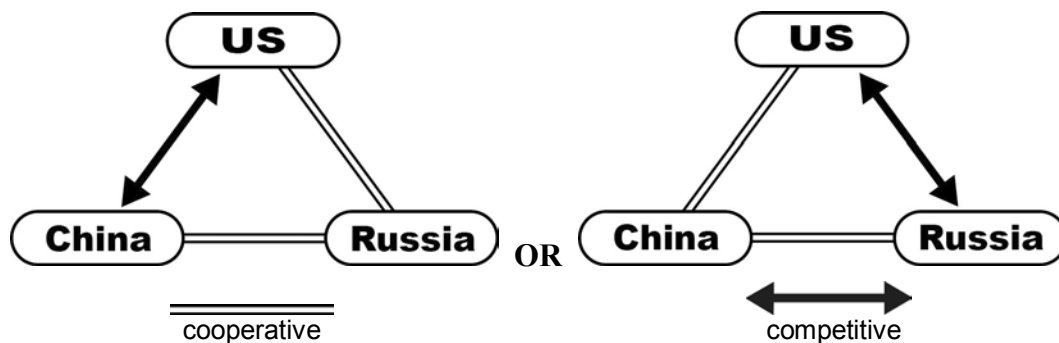
Some U.S. researchers now again prefer to depict the Sino-Russian partnership as "antagonistic" to the U.S. However, they ignore the fact that the all-plus-sum triangle appeared only after 9/11, as illustrated in the Introduction. During that period, all three countries cooperated against a common "threat," the Taliban regime of Afghanistan and other related "international terrorists." After the Iraq war started, this cooperation faded as some countries, including Russia, began to voice their displeasure with the U.S. Then, these researchers suddenly sounded the alarm over the danger of a Sino-Russian partnership against the U.S. Although Sino-Russian relations had been developing *per se*, owing to bilateral cooperation on issues such as the border arrangement, it was an ongoing process which was neither interrupted nor halted by 9/11. Sino-Russian relations have already acquired a sort of permanence (at least for the time being), and appear less influenced by their ties with the U.S.

Figure 13: Evolution of the U.S.-China-Russia triangle



Regardless of the realities of the Sino-Russian partnership, U.S. policies seek, at the very least, to offset the possible negative influences suggested by the triangle shown at above right, since the U.S. is losing the advantage that it once enjoyed during the Cold War and during the early post-Cold War period. Then, the U.S. will seek to renew one of the following romantic triangles, which are more favorable for its cooperation in Eurasia:

Figure 14: Romantic triangles for U.S. interests



A new "romance"??

Despite the fundamental improvement in their bilateral relationship enabled by the border progress, some challenges remain in Sino-Russian relations, so it is natural that, assuming that three-way cooperative relations are not likely or possible, China prefers the triangle on the right while Russia prefers the left. Currently, the U.S. seems hesitant to decide which situation might be better. Some opinion leaders lean more toward China than Russia owing to China's cautious approach toward the U.S. and continued tension between Washington and Moscow, despite the "reset." On the other hand, some believe that a frustrated and "non-revisionist" Russia no longer represents a "threat" to the U.S., and prefer for Washington to keep a wary eye on China.

However, as illustrated in Section I, this kind of simple balance game does not function as well as it did in the 1990s. The pacified border lessens the burden of the Sino-Russian axis and changes the situation. The equations of the nuclear proliferation functional triangles shown above are not as beneficial to the U.S. as they once were when they were heavily influenced by border politics. How might the U.S. react to this new situation?

One possible and attractive option for the United States should be to strengthen its alliance with Japan, and extend alliance cooperation on various issues, not just the military defense of Japan. Alliance cooperation on economic, political, and social challenges on the Eurasian continent will have a manifold effect:

- it will contribute positively to the development of the Eurasian landmass, which for the sake of this discussion we may call “Greater Northeast Asia”;
- it could enhance energy security in the region, on which the global economy is heavily dependent;
- it will stabilize and strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance, which is facing current short-term political challenges and which may face fundamental challenges in the future, most likely the establishment of North Korea as a viable nuclear power; and
- it will add a buffer and therefore some stability to the United States’s general relationships with China and Russia.

These developments all would be widely beneficial, and creating the dynamic to enable them is contingent on Japan normalizing its border relations with either or both Russia and China. If this is accomplished, Japan’s increased presence in international relations beyond Northeast Asia – perhaps especially in Central Asia – would be more effective.

How can the U.S.-Japan alliance function in Central Asia, South Asia, Mongolia, and even Iran? A redefinition of the U.S.-Japan alliance could have a great effect in Eurasia where, with intensive cooperation with India, the all-plus-sum U.S.-Japan-China-Russian quadrangle for regional stability could be revived, namely against the threat of terrorism. On a more specific level, the U.S.-Japan-India triangle could help tranquilize large areas of the Eurasian continent.

In previous centuries, the Eurasian great powers such as Russia and China were mainly land powers, often competing with each other but sometimes uniting against sea powers such as Britain or the U.S. However, the former challenges between China and Russia are tranquilized and defused by the solution of their border dispute, and the benefits are felt beyond the bilateral relationship, stretching to Central Asian borderlands and toward the Southeast Asian zone even including the Sino-Vietnam border in the South China Sea. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s success in re-bordering and trans-bordering cooperation is important for the future Eurasian community.²⁴ The

²⁴ See, Akihiro Iwashita (ed.), *Toward a New Dialogue on Eurasia: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Partner*, Slavic Research Center, Sapporo, 2007.

organization is gradually overcoming an old tradition of competitiveness among neighbors over terrain.

If the realities of cooperation among Eurasian land powers are rightly understood and kept open and transparent for outside powers, it would not repeat the old scheme of the “land vs. sea” that some pretend to the Sino-Russian cooperation represents against the U.S.-Japan alliance, plus India and Australia. Conflict among the sea powers, namely the burgeoning tension between China and the United States over maritime rights and responsibilities, may come to the forefront and promise to be more difficult to manage than land border issues. However, even if Japan is an in-between “land” and “sea” power on Eurasia (the semi-border line, shown before, represents the Japan’s ambivalent and double-edged geopolitical position), its increasing influence in the alliance with the U.S. could lead to more constructive approaches toward future sea border rivalry in Northeast Asia. Japan’s geopolitical uniqueness seems undoubtedly to encourage a new border dynamism for peace and prosperity on and beyond the region.

Conclusion: redefining the alliance for a “Greater Northeast Asia”

As discussed above, “shared values,” such as democracy, are not a sufficient basis for a strong and vibrant alliance. However, the new geopolitics is more than just a game of billiards in which states can form brief alliances with or against other states for short-term gains. The accelerating loss of the monopoly of nuclear weapons by the largest established powers has completely changed the rules of the game. What happens along borders is closely related and intertwined with a superpower’s hegemony over a given region or the whole world. Will this new phenomenon create a global condition in which a “superpower” must collaborate with other “great” powers, sharing the stakes and burdens, and harmoniously work toward a more stable world, more acceptable to most parties across various regions?

“Northeast Asia” should be re-imagined as a transforming and integral part of the world which overlaps with other spaces. “Northeast Asia” must transform itself into a region where peace and cooperation can be developed and spread. It is also natural to redefine allies as more reliable and more global constructive partners for reshaping the world order through cooperation. The time has come to redefine the area as “greater Northeast Asia,” taking into account the need for global security beyond the variables of romantic triangles.