

# Relations Between the Big Powers: USA, Russia and China

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*The relations within the big-power triangle: USA, Russia and China will determine to a high degree both global and regional trends, the issues of peace and security, as well as the character of international cooperation. Russia is certain to occupy a prominent place in American politics. NATO eastward expansion, closer links with the Baltic states, and the American economic-political incursions into the former Soviet republics in Central Asia should be regarded as a kind of post-cold-war response to this still impressive Russian military potential. It is, at the same time, a concrete expression of the existing opposing geostrategic interests, and the Balkan region can expect a similar fate. America has continued its constructive political involvement regarding relations with China which is regarded by the USA as a country that might seriously jeopardise American global leadership accompanied by calls to China to become an equal and responsible member of the international community and part of the new global order. Human rights issues in China have been raised and clear warnings given that America would oppose any attempt at a forcible incorporation of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China. Croatia, as a small country should look for some scope for action within the triangle of great powers, aware of the place it occupies as a country situated in Central Europe, on the Mediterranean and in Southeastern Europe.*

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## 1. Introduction

In spite of all the current developments, introducing more and more players on the international scene, the top players will evidently continue to take a prominent place in the system of global international affairs. The relations within the big-power triangle: USA, Russia and China will determine to a high degree both global and regional trends, the issues of peace and security, as well as the character of international cooperation. The mightiest power in contemporary world, which claims at the same time to be the chief authority in international affairs, will remain a decisive factor in shaping these relations. Its past actions and politics can best serve as indicators of future American tendencies and of American stances with regard to the other two powers.

RUSSIA has maintained an important place in Clinton's strategy. It is a country which, on the one hand, still figures as a nuclear power, but, on the other, due to the profound crisis it is undergoing, presents a major threat to European and global development. The efforts of Russia to be treated as a big power, a global peer of the USA, proved to be totally unrealistic, notably when the crisis in Russia assumed overwhelming proportions, refuting any serious possibility of an equal partnership.

Given the global character of Russo-American relations, and especially because of Russia's nuclear status and of its role in the efforts to stop the proliferation of the latest military technologies, the Clinton Administration did its best to keep Russia in the mainstream of world affairs, so as to enable it to act jointly with America on some of the vital issues. In the belief that Russia's integration into the world system could be useful and that this could help towards a smoother Russian transformation, Russia

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was encouraged to take steps bringing it closer to America and Western Europe. This rapprochement was also designed to keep the process of nuclear disarmament in the centre of American-Russian relations despite the reluctance of the Russian Duma to ratify START II.

Parallel to these efforts to bring Russia closer to the global system, support was given to all Russian reforms in the direction of liberalisation and democracy. However, the great setbacks in transformation and the increasingly grave internal situation, demonstrating the crisis of the Russian reform model, are watched in Washington with great concern, since they raise the whole issue of Yeltsin's legacy and of the country's entire future. Impoverished, humiliated and devastated, this great country finds it more and more difficult to join the mainstream, and all the economic and financial injections have proved to be either inappropriately used or too negligible for the vast Russian spaces. The total erosion of the system, combined with the demoralised society, is turning Russia from a super state into a super problem of global proportions.

Aware of these tendencies, and of the opportunity they provide to put an end to any possibility of Russia posing a threat ever again, American strategic decision-makers launched a series of measures intended to restrict Russia's scope for political action within the international community. At the same time, efforts were made to reduce Russian influence from the Baltic Sea and down to Central Asia and to weaken the links of some former Soviet republics with Moscow. In result of the initial suspicions towards the activities of the Commonwealth of Independent States, measures were undertaken to promote freer relations of these countries with America, which automatically meant the loosening of ties with Russia. This was particularly true of Central Asian countries, where American policy has already gained a firm foothold. All attempts to strengthen the Commonwealth of Independent States raise US suspicions, and the announcement of new links between Belarus and Russia was unfavourably assessed in Washington as an attempt to create a new Soviet Union. After Central Europe, it is now the turn of Southeast Europe to be the scene of suppression of Russian interests, and the intensification of relations with Baltic states also manifests American interest in that region.

The signing of the Founding Act between Russia and NATO in 1997 was the definite culmination of the efforts to evolve a cooperative relationship with Russia. It was meant as a formal acknowledgement of the willingness to grant Russia special status with regard to the Atlantic Treaty Organisa-

tion. In practical terms, this meant greater Russian cooperativeness in the then prevailing international crises (Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Middle East, Iraq), while, on the other hand, it became evident that the Act did not offer any chance of forging a strategic partnership, which Russia was particularly anxious to achieve. The signing of a similar Act with Ukraine only served to further minimise the formal value of Russian links with NATO, while the overwhelming nationalist-communist majority in the Duma brought to the fore issues concerning Russian heritage and the current lines of development of the great Euro-Asian state.

In view of the present developments and problems, it can be expected that this policy of limited concessions, combined with firm suppression of any Russian attempt at expansion, will continue to characterise Russo-American relations also in the future. Unlike the period of the Soviet Union, American policy-makers are aware today of the real strength, or weakness, of Russia, and it is not very likely that they will build their bilateral relations on any foundations but those of the real strength and usefulness of Russia.

Irrespective of who became the US President, Russia is certain to occupy a prominent place in American politics. Even though it is a country with only one-tenth of the American GDP, and teetering on the brink of political, psychological and economic collapse, Washington is bound to continue attributing special importance to that country. In spite of its present weakness, Russia is a nuclear power second only to the USA, and its present strength as well as potential in terms of proliferation, technology, personnel and equipment is such as to pose a potential threat to American national interests.

## 2. Clinton policy

NATO eastward expansion, closer links with the Baltic states, and the American economic-political incursions into the former Soviet republics in Central Asia should be regarded as a kind of post-cold-war response to this still impressive Russian military potential. It is, at the same time, a concrete expression of the existing opposing geostrategic interests, and the Balkan region can expect a similar fate.

Clinton's policy, which tried not to irritate Moscow unduly and pursued its goals gradually, will probably be continued by different methods. At any rate, the Russian crisis is so deep that there is little chance of Russia resorting to solutions involving a confrontation with American policies. Russia will

certainly use every opportunity to show that it is still a major power, but it will be difficult to find practical scope for the assertion of such an international status of Russia. American policy-makers have come to realise that some alliances, such as the announced alliance between Russia, Belarus and Yugoslavia, have no special relevance. The same could be said of the attempts and announcements of alliances on the line Moscow-Tehran-Beijing, or of creating a Chinese-Russian or Russian-Indian axis. In all of these countries, though, America has enough economic clout to slow down or, if necessary, stop altogether the development of relations in an anti-American direction.

Seeing in Russia a former superpower and today a country which can at best figure as a regional superpower, the US will probably use all available instruments to keep Russia out of the way, in a new form of a more flexible and definitely milder containment, trying to prevent its speedy recovery. At the same time, it will seek to take advantage of all Russian failings to penetrate Central Asia, an area that might become in the future an important stage of Russo-American contest.

The phrase 'Russo-American partnership' has already been expunged from the Russian political vocabulary. All that is mentioned nowadays is Russian-American cooperation, and it is along these lines that future American policy is likely to pursue normal relations with Russia, exploring possibilities for joint actions but also trying to profit by the situation brought about by the dissolution of the USSR and by the present weak position of Russia.

When it comes to CHINA, America has continued its constructive political involvement. Although China is regarded in the USA as a country that might seriously jeopardise American global leadership, and some American analysts are already warning of the so-called Chinese threat, Clinton's team adopted a more relaxed position. The policy of constructive involvement in China means in practice that, as a reward for intensifying economic relations with the USA and for a certain improvement of democratic standards and human rights, China has been granted most-favoured-nation status in trade relations.

Accompanied by calls to China to become an equal and responsible member of the international community and part of the new global order, human rights issues in China have been raised and clear warnings given that America would oppose any attempt at a forcible incorporation of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China.

In the fabric of the many ties linking China and the US today an important element was the lift-

ing of the embargo on American nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, which enabled China to procure American equipment for its nuclear power plants. For its part, China undertook the obligation not to sell nuclear equipment to Iran, an undertaking that satisfied the American side. On the other hand, parallel to the Chinese insistence on an early admission to the WTO, Chinese unwillingness to open its markets is a cause of dissatisfaction for the Clinton Administration, given the large Chinese debt to America (over 47 billion dollars and still rising).

Seeing in China a country that could become the largest industrial manufacturer in the world within the next twenty years or so, American strategic experts are anxious to make a realistic assessment of China's place. It is already evident that the coexistence between the socialist character of the country's social and political system and a market-oriented economy based on capitalist relations is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain and that the populous China might find itself in trouble at some future point. This trouble need not be only economic by nature but might grow into a crisis that would threaten the very existence of the country.

Although such a course of events might serve American global interests, since it would eliminate a large country that might become a major competitor to America, and is a socialist state to boot, for the time being, the view prevails in Washington that the best policy is to maintain broad contacts with China, without any special assistance to speed up its development.

### 3. Crisis in Asia

A major crisis in Asia, in which the central government in Beijing would cease to exist, could have enormous repercussions, and it is considered that American strategic and economic interests would be better served with China remaining in place, as a country which, although not sharing all American views on the world order or on the US role as the only global power, still helps to maintain peace and stability in a vast part of the Asian Continent.

American economic involvement in China to date has opened new possibilities for expanding Sino-American ties, and at the same time helped to direct China firmly to American markets, financial capital and sources of modern technology. Even if it tried to find another partner, China would have to count on prompt American counter-measures, and the US is so strong as to be able to keep its relations with China at the level which suits it best.

In evolving its relations with China, Ameri-

can policy is not likely to seek spectacular breakthroughs. More probably, the present state of relations will be regarded as satisfactory to both sides and therefore not requiring any major or rapid introduction of new elements. American presence in China is already so extensive that a change in the scope and character of these relations could occur as a result of Chinese economic progress and the creation of a stronger Chinese market, a development that would make room for even stronger American penetration.

Clinton's policy of involvement in China has paved the way for a considerably broader cooperation, and had Gore been elected it may be assumed that he would have continued with this policy. Even with Bush's victory, the size of the Chinese market, the past involvement of the US there, and the importance of China seem to be sufficient to warrant the expectation that the existing relations will be maintained at the present level. This would help to neutralise the possible claims of the Republican right, urging a more determined stance on China. In conclusion: irrespective of the election results, developments in China will continue to be carefully examined, especially the possibility of China entering an alliance with countries which are not counted among America's staunchest friends (Russia, Iran).

As a small country, CROATIA will have to look for some scope for action within this triangle of great powers, aware of the place it occupies as a country situated in Central Europe, on the Mediterranean and in South-Eastern Europe. Realistically speaking, Croatia's capacities are not such as to warrant a major strategic partnership with any of these countries, but rather the cultivation of mutually beneficial relations.

1. A priority subject of Croatian politics will undoubtedly be the USA, which remains a major factor in the region of South-Eastern Europe, important for Croatia not only in terms of bilateral links but also as supporter of Croatia's admission to Euro-Atlantic structures. Directly or behind political scenes, the US is likely to call the long-term shots in the region and also to assess the degree to which the requirements have been met. In the case of Croatia, this means that the USA will not give up its demands regarding:

- the observance of the Dayton Accords,
- the return of refugees,
- promotion of regional cooperation
- Croatia's cooperation with the Hague Tribunal.

In keeping with the degree of cooperativeness, America will probably be prepared to open its doors

to greater political, economic, scientific and cultural cooperation, and also to support Croatia's efforts to establish closer relations with European structures.

2. Despite the downfall of the Milošević regime, Russia can be expected to do its best to preserve its role in South-Eastern Europe. Apart from the traditional Russian interests in that part of Europe, this is at the same time the only region where Russian policies can be projected today. As regards Croatia, it will most probably be viewed by Russia as a country primarily suitable for developing economic relations, and it will be up to Croatia to make the necessary efforts to realise such economic cooperation.

3. Although politically present in South-Eastern Europe, China has no great chances of achieving any political ends. However, as a large country with a large market, China's economic importance for Croatia should be indisputable. ■