Power Shift, Strategic Triangle, and Alliances in East Asia*

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This paper complements the traditional realist perspective (TP) with the strategic triangle theory (ST) in analyzing alliance formation and shift in East Asia. Alliance is perceived as a marriage triangle, and is subject to the dynamics of strategic actions taken by players to elevate their roles in the game. During the Cold War, two hierarchically structured alliance systems opposed each other in East Asia. Power shift in the continental system disrupted the Sino-Soviet pact, while hegemonic stability in the maritime system buttressed the U.S.-led alliance. The division in the continental system offered Washington opportunities to befriend Beijing and buttress its position in the U.S.-Soviet-PRC strategic triangle. Washington’s allies were prompted to act likewise. The tension in competitive rapprochement was absorbed by the hegemonic structure of the maritime system. The result was collective hedging (balancing-cum-engagement). In the post-Cold War era, the predominance of the United States caused the revival of the Beijing-Moscow nexus, now constructed as an equal partnership. Again one finds the continental and the maritime systems facing each other. Cross-system hedging is inevitable as this would increase the payoff.

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of strategic players. Russia and Taiwan are examined in the above context, combining the perspectives of both TP and ST. The rise of China is expected to cause tension in the continental system, as predicted by the internal security dilemma. The rise of China also impacts on the maritime system by both increasing the tendency to balance it (as predicted by TP), and to improve relations with it (as predicted by ST), hence prompting hedging. However, hedging is difficult for Taiwan, for it is only loosely connected to the maritime alliance.

KEYWORDS: alliance; strategic triangle; balancing; hedging; China.

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Alliances are built in order to balance against a threat that nations find themselves unable to deal with sufficiently on their own. They are instruments of "external balancing."\(^1\) This is the traditional realist view of alliance formation. From an alternative perspective, one can put an alliance in the context of a strategic game. A closer look at the structure of an alliance in its simplest form reveals that it is composed of two allies arrayed against a common threat. Obviously this is a triangular structure, and thus can be analyzed using the strategic triangle model. When power ratios in the triangle change, incentives for players to keep or shift their positions therein also change. This may cause a disequilibrium and restructuring of the triangle. By combining the traditional perspective and the framework of the strategic triangle, we can gain a better understanding of alliance formation and shift. In the following discussion, we will examine the traditional perspective and the strategic triangle theory, review the formation and development of alliance systems in East Asia during the Cold War, analyze the persistence of alliances in the post-Cold War period, take a close look at the positions in the triangle of Russia and Taiwan, and explore the possible impact of a rising China on the alliance structure in the region.