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THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS: LESSONS FROM THE INDOCHINA WARS

by

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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated
this Thesis is my own work.

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ABSTRACT

Rapid development in the international political arena may render the Sino-Soviet-American triangular games much less important, but this particular triangle will very likely continue to command attention in the study of big power politics. Although the strategic triangle has been widely studied in the West, the triangular literature still leaves much room to be desired. This thesis is an effort to build a compound triangular model and to study the triangle in the context of the Indochina conflicts from 1964 to 1980, in which all the three powers were heavily involved. The thesis is divided into three parts: theoretical analysis, case study and conclusion.

The first part (two chapters) consists of triangular literature review and triangular model building based on the critique of the existing triangular literature. In the chapter of triangular literature review, five basic schools, i.e., system analysis, power politics approach, triangular nuclear deterrence, linkage politics and triangular models are identified, with each of them having both strong and weak points. The term "polarity" is redefined so as to clarify the vagueness in the definition of the strategic triangle. In order to better understand the structural characteristics of the strategic triangle and the relationship between the strategic triangle and regional conflicts, the author creates a compound model of the triangle. One of the most important concepts associated with this model is "triangular restriction", which is used to explain limitations of triangulation. And nine basic propositions are raised with regard to the model: (1) the tendency of a coalition or collusion between two of the three poles and the fear of this tendency in each pole constitute the main dynamic of the triangle; (2) the weak pole in a triangle that contains two strong poles is not only the most susceptible to the impact of balance shift in the triangle, but also able to benefit far out of proportion to its real power through triangulation; (3) each pole wants to triangulate itself into a better position, and whenever possible, tries to get and keep the leverage of the pivot, which is based on the competitive wooing by the other two mutually conflicting poles; (4) the strategic triangle is an inherently restricted triangle, with the degree of its restriction varying in different situations; (5) the more restricted the strategic triangle is, the less effective the triangulation and the pivot would be; and the less restricted the strategic triangle is, the more effective the triangulation and the pivot leverage would be; (6) the strengths of the big powers in the global triangular relationship may not necessarily correspond with
those at the regional level; (7) the more restricted the strategic triangle is, the easier would be the triangulation of the state in the focus of big powers' contention; the less restricted the strategic triangle is, the harder would be the triangulation of that state; (8) since the strategic triangle is inherently a restricted triangle, the state in the focus of big powers' contention would always have some room to manipulate among the three powers; (9) balance shifts in the strategic triangle can influence a regional conflict, in which the big powers are actively involved; and such a regional conflict may also influence the pattern of the strategic triangle itself.

The second part, a case study of the strategic triangle in the context of the Indochina conflicts (1964-80), is divided into three chapters in accordance with the three major periods in the evolution of the general patterns of the strategic triangle and the corresponding periods at the regional level. In the first pattern (1964-69), China was located in the negative pivot position, while there was no (positive) pivot actor at all. The United States escalated the Indochina war under the old bipolar assumption and both China and the Soviet Union responded in like manner. This situation created a golden time for the North Vietnamese to play between China and the Soviet Union. In the second pattern (1970-1975), China's position was significantly improved with the onset of the Sino-American rapprochement, while the United States was in the pivot position. This period witnessed various triangulations of the United States, which were employed for the purpose of achieving its "peace with honor". And in the third pattern, the Soviet Union was located in the negative pivot position, while the United States and China were moving toward a quasi-alliance. But in the regional balance, China was in the most unfavorable position, facing a growing challenge from a unified Vietnam, which sought regional dominance with the support of the Soviet Union.

The final part (two chapters) summarizes the contributions of the research as well as the strengths and limitations of the compound triangular model. In terms of the strategic triangle itself, the contributions include the reasons for and the likely consequences of triangular rigidity, the triangular restriction and its impact, and the dynamic interaction between the strategic triangle and regional conflicts. The contributions to the study of the Indochina conflicts during this period lie in the fact that the use of the model simplifies the work of coping with such a complex subject as the involvement of the three powers in detail within the limited space available. This approach makes it possible to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the regional conflict itself, highlighting the impact of the triangular struggle to the development of the conflicts, and the risks and
opportunities of the Vietnamese Communists. In the end, the strengths and limitations of the compound model are analyzed.
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