

# Tri-Polarity Structure and the Post-Cold War Asia Pacific Regional Politics

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This paper discusses the tri-polarity structure (of the United States, the Soviet Union and China) from 1971 until 1991 and the impact on post-Cold War Asia Pacific regional politics. The objectives of the paper are threefold: First, to explain how important the tri-polarity structure is to regional politics of the Asia Pacific; Second, to discuss the relationship of the tri-polarity structure (1971-1991) and the regional political structure after the end of the Cold War, and; Third, to analyse the relationship of the rising and China's strong economic position and the tri-polarity structure. This paper concludes that the tri-polarity structure was an important and influence to the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific after the end of the Cold War. Without tri-polarity structure, it would have been impossible for China to achieve very rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s and pave the way to become the second largest global economy at the end of 2010. Without economic strength, it would have been impossible for China to become a strong military power. The strong position of China in politics (military) and economics influenced the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific. It would not have had the same impact if it had become a unipolar political structure, as in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

**Key words:** *Tri-polarity, Post-Cold War, Asia Pacific, China, Soviet Union, the United States, Uni-polarity, rapid development.*

## **Introduction**

This paper discusses the tri-polar structure (i.e. the power relation and political configuration) between the United States, the Soviet Union and China from 1971 until 1991, as well as its impact on the post-Cold War Asia Pacific region's political structure. How the tri-polarity influenced the power configuration in the Asia Pacific region. How important the tri-polarity structure in the regional politics of the Asia Pacific; the relationship of the tri-polarity structure (1971-1991) and the regional political structure after the end of the Cold War 1991: the relationship of the rising and China's strong economic position and the tri-polarity structure. The tri-polarity was an important period that strongly influenced the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific after the end of the Cold War. Without tri-polarity it was impossible for communist China to achieve very rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s and pave the way to become the second-largest global economy by the end of 2010. Without economic strength, it would have been impossible for China to become a strong military power. The strong position of China in politics (military) and economy influenced the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific by not becoming a unipolarity, in contrast to what happened in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Tri-polarity during the Cold War influenced creation of the structure after the Cold War ended in 1991. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the regional political structure was not directly changed to unipolarity.

## **Methodology**

### ***Objective of Study***

The objectives of the study are: -

- a. to explain how important the structure of tri-polarity was in the regional politics of the Asia Pacific;
- b. to discuss the relationship of the tri-polarity (1971-1991) and the regional political structure after the end of the Cold War in 1991, and;
- c. to analyse the relationship of the rising and China's strong economic position, the tri-polarity structure and the impact to the regional political structure after the end of the Cold War.

### **Method of Study/Data Collection**

This study uses secondary data; books and journal articles related to the topic.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Structural Realism applied in this study. International structure had great impact on the power configuration (economic and political) at the regional and state level. Political development at the state and regional levels is not free from international factors (Waltz, 2008). State and regional factors are not free because the systemic factor compels them to act in certain ways (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union at the international level influenced the creation of the tri-polarity in the Asia Pacific region. The emergence of communist China as a major power at the regional level (strongly supported by the United States in tri-polarity structure) as an American strategy in containing Soviet power at the regional level. Hence, this study uses structural realism as basic theory in understanding and explaining the tri-polar structure in the Asia Pacific region, and the strong influence of the political structure at the international level.

### ***Scope of Study***

The scope of the study covers the power configuration and relations between the three major powers (the United States, the Soviet Union and China Communists) during the tri-polarity period from 1971 until 1991, and the impact to the regional politics and power configuration during the first decade after the end of the Cold War, i.e. 1991-2001.

### ***Significance of Study***

The study is significant in understanding the regional political structure in the Asia Pacific after the end of the Cold War. It asks why the regional political structure was different to other regions, particularly Europe. European regional politics changed from bipolarity during the Cold War to unipolarity after the end of the Cold War. Why did the Asia Pacific region not also dramatically change to unipolarity? The answer is the China factor. How did China rise rapidly as a strong power, and when did the rapid development in China begin? The study examines how the tri-polarity from 1971-1991 is important in explaining the rise and rapid development of China's economy in the 1980s and 1990s. The past thirty years strongly influence the current position of China. Would it have been possible for China to become the strong military and economic power it is without economic and political development during the tri-polarity period? This study is therefore significant in understanding post-Cold War Asia Pacific regional political economy, power configuration and foreign policy decision-making.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### ***What is Tri-polar Structure***

Tri-polar structure refers to three dominant powers that play a major role in a certain region during a certain period (Henderson, 1998). One good example of tri-polarity in international politics was in the Asia Pacific during the period from 1971 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During this period, three major powers (the United States, the Soviet Union and communist China) played a dominant role in the power configuration of the Asia Pacific region (Yahuda, 2006). Before 1971, China was not recognised as a major power in international and regional politics. The region was controlled and dominated by just two major powers, i.e. the United States and the Soviet Union (bipolarity). The Asia Pacific region was characterised as tri-polarity after China was recognised as one of the major powers in 1972.

### ***Two Phases of Tri-polarity in the Asia Pacific***

Tri-polarity in the Asia Pacific from 1971 until 1991 can be divided into two phases, with Phase I from 1971 until 1979, and Phase II from 1980 until 1991.

#### ***Phase I of Tri-polarity, 1971-1979***

During Phase I, the United States was the pivotal power. The United States had good relations with the Soviet Union and China. During this period, relations between the Soviet Union and China was not harmonious. The United States controlled and maintained the bad relation between the Soviet Union and China (Yahuda, 2006). The bad relation between China the Soviet Union was important in maintaining the stability of the tri-polarity structure. The United States had to avoid a harmonious relationship between the other two powers. At the same time, the United States had to create and maintain a good relationship with both the Soviet Union and China. During this period, China had a harmonious relationship with the United States.

#### ***Phase II of Tri-polarity, 1979-1991***

Phase II of tri-polarity in the Asia Pacific began after 1979, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During Phase II, China became the pivotal power; China had good relations with the United States and with the Soviet Union. During this period, the United States and the Soviet Union had a bad relationship. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 influenced the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union (Young & Kent, 2013). Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union worsened after the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan. During the second tri-polar phase, from 1979-1991,



China had good relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States; China became the pivotal power during this period. During this period, China improved diplomatic relations with the United States and with the Soviet Union. The deterioration of US relations with the Soviet Union had an effect on US policy towards China (Yahuda, 2006). Deng Xiao-Peng, the Chinese president, made a state visit to the United States in January 1979. The United States gave its support to China in economic development and sophisticated technological support (Harding, 1992). China's economic relations with Western countries improved dramatically during Phase II of the tri-polarity. Western investment flowed into China. Economic cooperation between China and Western powers improved during this period. After the death of Deng Xiao-Peng in 1997, the new president Jiang Zemin continued the economic policy created by Deng Xiao-Peng. Trade relations and investment from Western countries improved dramatically under President Jiang Zemin and greatly contributed to China's rapid development.

### ***The Tri-polarity and China's Economic Development***

The tri-polar period from 1971-1991 was the important period for China's economic development. Good relations with the United States under the tri-polar power structure (and the United States as a hegemonic power) opened opportunities for China's trade and economic relations with countries under the American economic sphere. During this period, especially under Deng Xiao-Peng (from 1978 until his death in 1997), major economic transformation occurred, which took China from a closed economy to one of open economic policy. China re-oriented its economic production from domestic to a foreign market (Simone & Feraru, 1995). Many economic policies were started, encouraging the economic development of China. Economic relations with the United States, other Western countries and Japan improved dramatically (So & Chiu, 1995). Deng Xiao-Peng encouraged foreign investment into China. In the 1980s, foreign investment flooded into China from Western countries, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Japanese trade relations with China improved rapidly from the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s, China had become Japan's second trading partner, behind the United States (Yahuda, 2006). China supplied Japan with the oil, coal, and strategic raw materials that the resource-poor island nation lacked in exchange for the capital, technology, and high-level manufactured products that China required for its economic take-off.

China's economic development in the late 1970s and 1980s had closed, which was related to the tri-polar political structure, especially the better economic relationship with the United States and other countries under the American economic sphere. The rapid economic development of China during the tri-polar period had closed relations with political and power configuration in the Asia Pacific region.

### ***Structure of the Regional Politics of the Asia Pacific after 1991 - Why was it Different to the European Political Structure?***

The structure of regional politics in the Asia Pacific after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was strongly influenced by the strong position of China. Without this, the regional political structure that would have emerged in the Asia Pacific would have been one of unipolarity. The United States was not able to play as a single power (unipolarity) in the Asia Pacific because of the emergence of China as another strong power.

The situation in the Asia Pacific was different to the situation in Europe. In Europe, there was bipolarity during the Cold War (1947-1991). The political border between communist-socialist and capitalist-democratic ideology was very clear in Europe. The countries in Western Europe were controlled by the United States, under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Eastern Europe was controlled by the Soviet Union under the Warsaw Pact. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, only NATO and the United States controlled and dominated Europe (both Western and Eastern Europe).

The other different aspect of the American position in Europe and the Asia Pacific was the type of security agreement held with its allies in both regions (Duffield, 2001). In Europe, the United States created a multilateral security agreement, i.e. NATO, but in the Asia Pacific (especially in the East Asian region), the United States did not create a multilateral security agreement. With local and regional factors, the United States created a bilateral security agreement with its allies, i.e. The US-Japan Alliance in 1951, with South Korea in 1953 and with the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 1954 (Cha, 2010). The type of bilateral security agreement influenced the degree of regional security and political stability after the end of the Cold War in 1991.

### ***Tri-polarity and the Impact on Regional Structure and Power Configuration in the Asia Pacific Region***

The impact of the tri-polarity to the regional structure and power configuration in the Asia Pacific is very clear. With three powers during the period 1971-1991, still have two powers after the collapsed of Soviet Union in 1991. During the early years of tri-polarity, China's position in the military and economy were not strong, but rapid economic development and China's new economic foreign policy in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to a stronger position in world politics. China's position as the second largest economy by the end of 2010 was a result of its economic policies since the late 1970s.

### ***What is the Difference between the Asia Pacific and European Political Structure?***

There is a difference in the international and regional political structure in Europe and the Asia Pacific region. The political structure in Europe had directly changed from bipolarity (1947-1991) to unipolarity after the end of the Cold War in 1991 (Jackson & Sorenson, 2007). The political and economic development in Eastern Europe since the end of the 1980s contributed to the collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's influence in Eastern Europe. Former communist states in Eastern Europe changed their political ideologies from communist-socialist to democratic-capitalist. They joined the European Union and become members of NATO (Keylor, 2003). The Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991. East Germany and West Germany, separated during the early years of the Cold War, were reunited in 1989.

The development of the political structure in the Asia Pacific is different from its development in Europe. From tri-polarity, the structure was not directly changed to unipolarity (Yahuda, 2006). Unlike East and West Germany, North and South Korea remained separated, as they were during the Cold War. The security agreement between the United States and its allies in the Asia Pacific region was still effective; there were no major changes following the Cold War period. The US-Japan Alliance that was signed in September 1951, the US-South Korea Security agreement signed in 1953, and the US-Republic of China (Taiwan) agreement that was signed in 1954 remained effective. The political structure in the Asia Pacific region, especially in North East Asia, still did not directly change to unipolarity after 1991, in contrast to what happened in Europe. What factors contributed to the situation in the Asia Pacific? The answer is the emergence of communist China as a strong power in politics, the military and the economy (Keylor, 2003). The economic situation of the Eastern communist state and the Soviet Union deteriorated from the mid-1980s, while China's economic situation rose rapidly under Presidents Deng Xiao-Peng and Jiang Zemin. China's good relations with the American hegemonic power under the tripolar structure had a positive impact on China, paving the way for it to become a strong global economic power after the end of the Cold War (Simone & Feraru, 1995).

European political structure dramatically changed from bipolarity to unipolarity in 1991, but in the Asia Pacific region, the tri-polarity did not significantly shift. It is difficult to say that the Asia Pacific characterised by bipolarity structure, but also clearly is not accurate to call uni-multipolarity structure. The author asserts that the situation in the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific during the period after the end of the Cold War was uni-multipolar. Uni-multipolarity means that the United States remained the strongest power, but was surrounded by other strong powers. Other powers were not able to make decisions without referring to the United States. At the same time, the United States had to consider

other strong powers (especially China and Russia, after the Putin administration began in 2000) in making any political decisions in the Asia Pacific region (Simonia, 2006).

### ***What is the Future Political Structure in the Asia Pacific Region?***

The future regional political structure in the Asia Pacific depends upon the position of the United States and other regional powers, especially China and Russia. Other powers, such as India and Japan, are likely to become stronger in the future and to play important roles in the Asia Pacific.

Unipolarity will shift to a new structure when the position of major power changes. If the position of the United States becomes stronger and the other powers become weaker, uni-multipolarity will emerge. If the position of the United States becomes slightly weaker, and other powers become stronger, uni-multipolarity will shift to a multi-polar structure. If just three major powers emerge and achieve a slightly similar position, tri-polarity will emerge again.

### **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the tri-polar structure discussed was an important period that strongly influenced the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific after the end of the Cold War. Without tri-polarity from 1971-1991 it would have been impossible for China to achieve such rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s, which paved way for it to become the second largest global economy at the end of 2010. Without economic strength, it would have been impossible for China to become a strong military power. The strong position of China in politics (military) and the economy influenced the regional political structure of the Asia Pacific, preventing it from becoming a unipolarity, unlike Europe (after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991). Unipolarity did not emerge in the Asia Pacific region because of China's strong position. The United States was not able to play its singular role like it did in Europe because of the strong position of China. The strong economic position of China made this communist power play differently with the Soviet Union and other Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. China's rapid economic development occurred in the second phase of tri-polarity (1980-1991). During this second phase, China became the pivotal power (the United States and the Soviet Union had bad relations during this period). As the pivotal power in the tri-polarity, good relations with the US benefited China's economic development. Investment and trade relations with the US and other American ally states had a very positive impact on China's economy and contributed to China's global economic power.



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