



---

## COOPERATIVE TRILATERALIZATION BY RISK:

### A WAY FOR MIDDLE AND MAJOR POWERS TO INFLUENCE THE CHINA-US RELATION ?

TANGUY STRUYE

*Professor of International Relations  
Université catholique de Louvain*

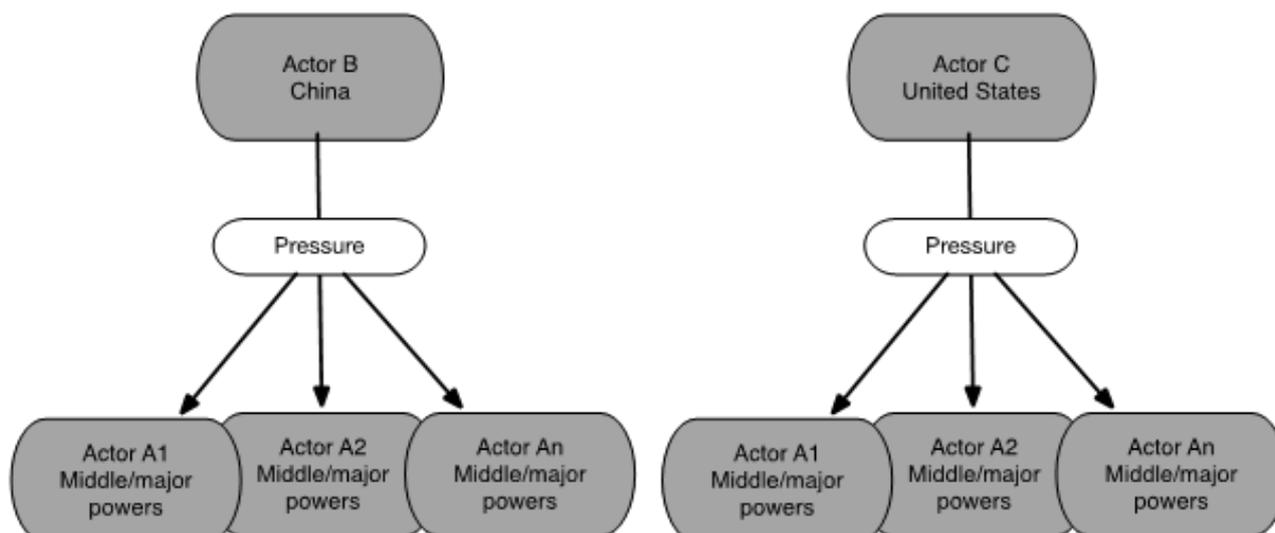
---

Over the last few years, there has been enhanced economic and military cooperation among middle powers, and between them and major powers such as Japan and India. Think about the rapprochement between Indonesia and Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, Australia and Vietnam, Australia and Japan, Japan and India, India and Vietnam, Australia and Malaysia, South Korea and Australia and so on. These rapprochements have been bilateral, sometimes trilateral (India-Japan-Australia) but still not multilateral.

Yet, if middle and major powers want to influence the future the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, they not only need to work more together but they will also need to influence the two great powers in the region (China and United States). Indeed, if they do not want to succumb under the pressure of Beijing and Washington, the alternative is to become credible actors in the region characterized by a strong collaborative relation. They have to find the right balance between Washington and Beijing in this “Asian century”, to harmonize economic and security objectives and need to adopt new policies in order to ensure a certain influence (concept of Ratzels’social Darwinism). As Cox mentioned middle power role is not static but dynamic and has to be “rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, they have to reinvent themselves.

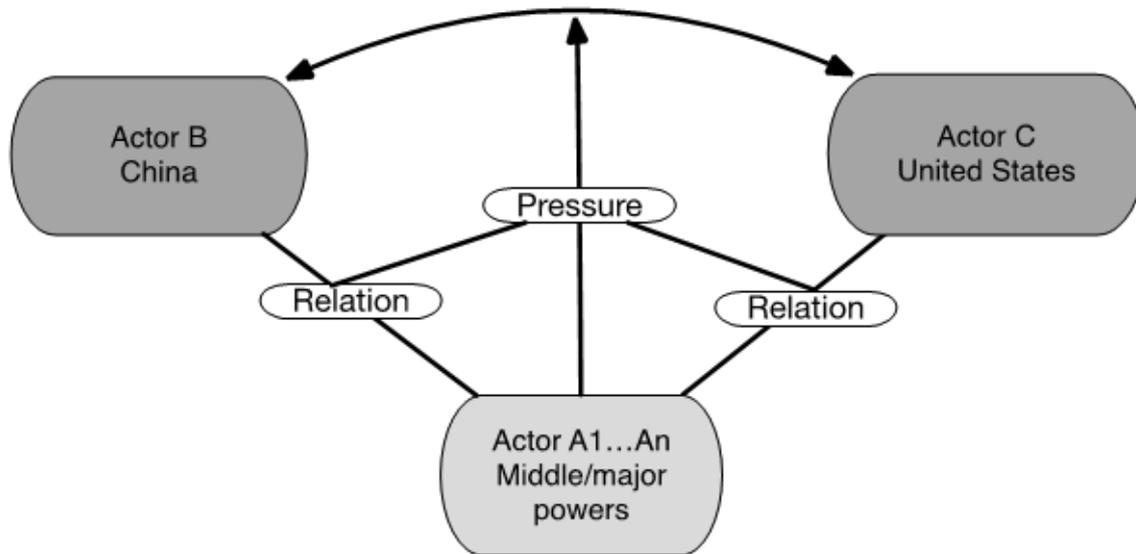
One potential way in the future to succeed would be by applying cooperative trilateralization by risk<sup>2</sup>, which is a dissuasive approach that could be used by middle and major powers in their relation towards the United States and China. For these powers (A1...An), it is important to avoid being under continuous pressure from China (B) and the US (C) and undergo the relation (fig.1).

Figure 1: Original bilateral relations



Consequently the objective is to avoid to be in an exclusive bilateral relationship (B-A1...An and C-A1...An) with one of the great powers and instead to involve the other great power in the relationship. Thus, instead of being in a bilateral relationship "B-A1...An" and "C-A1...An", it is important to trilateralize these relations by involving in the relation "B-A1...An", actor "C" and in the relation "C-A1...An", actor "B". By trilateralizing the bilateral relation (including a third actor in the original relation), middle and major powers can, instead of being under pressure, exercise some pressure on "B" and "C" but there is a second necessary condition: strong economic and defense cooperation between A1...An. Figure 2 illustrates our argument.

Figure 2: Cooperative trilateralization by risk



Trilateralization by risk could prevent one of the two great powers to intervene coercively against the middle and major powers, because the consequences would result in a greater vulnerability for one of the great powers in comparison to the other rival great power, leaving the latter in a strong and advantageous position. The objective is for actors "A1...An" (Middle and major powers) to exploit the rivalry and/or hostility between actors B (China) and C (United States). Indeed the more middle and major powers act together, the more they will be able to influence the "B-C" relation and pressure the great powers because of the following credible warning they could proclaim in a worst case scenario: In case of a potential threat of war provoked by China against these powers, the latter will always have the possibility to recognize that China will probably have the upper hand but at such a high cost that China will be extremely weakened, leaving the US as the predominant state, the US being the real rival of China. The same would count for a scenario (although less likely) concerning the United States.

All this would need smart diplomacy, flexibility, adaptability from the part of the middle and major powers. The stronger the relationships among the middle and major powers the more they will be credible to apply the concept of trilateralization by risk against the great powers.

There is still along way to go to achieve this objective. There are still a lot of challenges towards greater political, economical and defense integration between middle and major powers. The defiance among some States, well represented by the South Korea-Japan relationship, has clearly been an obstacle in the region to play a more proactive role and has prevented a positive snowball effect. That said South Korea, Australia and Indonesia (all three members of MIKTA) could form the core to move forward to more cooperation and integration. Furthermore all these States will have to walk a tightrope between Washington and Beijing. If successful they could help strengthening the regional security architecture as a stabilizing force. Thus, it is in the interest of middle and major powers to work together if they want to have more autonomy and gain greater influence. As Hayes explained, these powers are "knights, bishops and rooks in international relations who cannot dominate and thus have to display their strength in combination with others"<sup>3</sup>. As such they would become stakeholders, that is, security-makers instead of being reduced to the rank of security takers. The more these states will interact with each other, the more they will be able to influence the agenda-setting in the region and fulfil the role of facilitator, mediator and bridge-builder.

In conclusion, if they have to be careful to not punch above their weight, these middle and major powers can be the driving force of tomorrow's international system. They do not form a frozen middle. Because, in the end, it is those powers in the middle that will make or break the status quo: no leadership without followership! Therefore, ignoring middle and major powers carries significant risks. The great powers should be open and receptive to any new suggestion that may arise. In fine, if for Kenneth Waltz only great powers could determine the international system, hence marginalizing small and middle powers<sup>4</sup>, it is quite the contrary they can achieve considerable influence and weight on

the international structure and achieving cooperative trilateralization by risk would put them in an potential advantageous position.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Cooper, A., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, London, Palgrave, Macmillan, 1997, p. 8.
- 2 Barrea, J., *Théories des relations internationales*, Artel, 3ème édition, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994, p. 67.
- 3 Hayes, G., "Middle powers in the New World Order", in *Behind the Headlines*, vol. 51, n°2, Winter 1993-1994, p. 4.
- 4 "International structures are defined, first, by the ordering principle of the system in our case anarchy, and second, by the distribution of capabilities across units. In an anarchic realm, structures are defined in terms of their major units. International structures vary with significant changes in the number of great powers" (Waltz, K., "Realist thought and Neo-Realist Theory", in *Journal of International Affairs*, 44, n°1, 1990, p. 31).

Tanguy Stuye de Swielande is Professor of International Relations at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium).