Triad Theory and Its Application in International Relations: From Simmel's Social Geometry to Strategic Triangles in Global Politics

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ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) scholarship has long privileged the dyad as its principal unit of analysis, treating bilateral rivalry, alliance, and bargaining as the fundamental building blocks of world politics. Yet many of the most consequential dynamics of the international system, balancing, bandwagoning, mediation, and the manipulation of coalitions, are irreducibly triadic. This article revisits Georg Simmel's classical sociology of the triad and Theodore Caplow's theory of coalition formation in three-actor systems, arguing that these microsociological frameworks offer significant, underexploited analytical leverage for understanding great-power politics, regional security complexes, and emerging trilateral arrangements. Adapting Simmel's account of mediator, tertius gaudens, and divide-et-impera roles, and Caplow's predictive typology of coalition strength, the article develops a framework for analysing "strategic triangles" in international politics. It applies this framework to four empirical domains: the classic Sino-Soviet-American triangle of the 1970s and 1980s, Randall Schweller's tripolarity model, contemporary triangles such as United States-China-Russia and Russia-India-China, and emergent minilateral arrangements such as AUKUS. The article finds that triad theory illuminates recurring patterns of coalition formation, pivotal bargaining power, and systemic stability that dyadic and purely structural-realist accounts tend to obscure, while also identifying the theory's limitations in accounting for domestic politics, ideational variables, and multipolar complexity. It concludes by proposing avenues for extending triadic analysis to African and Global South regional systems.

Keywords: Triad Theory, Strategic Triangle, Coalition Formation, International Relations, Georg Simmel, Theodore Caplow, Tripolarity

INTRODUCTION

Background

Small-group dynamics have long informed the theoretical vocabulary of International Relations, even where this genealogy is rarely acknowledged. Balance-of-power theory, alliance theory, and bargaining models all draw, implicitly or explicitly, on assumptions about how actors behave in bounded social configurations. Among these configurations, the dyad, the pairing of two actors, has enjoyed overwhelming analytical primacy. Great-power rivalry is customarily narrated as a contest between two poles: Athens and Sparta, Rome and Carthage, the United States and the Soviet Union. Bipolarity, indeed, occupies a privileged place in structural-realist theorizing as the configuration most conducive to systemic stability (Waltz, 1979). Yet the historical and contemporary record of world politics is replete with triadic structures whose internal logic cannot be reduced to a pair of overlapping dyads. The Sino-Soviet-American triangle of the Cold War, the India-Pakistan-China security complex in South Asia, and the emerging United States-China-Russia configuration of the twenty-first century all exhibit dynamics, of pivot, coalition, and betrayal, that are distinctively triadic rather than dyadic in structure.

The sociological study of the triad predates its application to international politics by several decades. Georg Simmel's foundational essays on group size, first developed in the early twentieth century and later synthesised

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in his sociology of small groups, established that the addition of a third member to a dyad transforms the qualitative character of social interaction (Simmel, 1950). Theodore Caplow extended this insight into a formal theory of coalition formation, demonstrating that the distribution of power among three actors generates predictable patterns of alignment (Caplow, 1956, 1968). These insights migrated into International Relations chiefly through the vocabulary of "strategic triangles" popularised by Cold War diplomacy and subsequently formalised by scholars such as Lowell Dittmer (1981) and Randall Schweller (1998).

Problem Statement

Despite this promising migration, triad theory remains a marginal and underdeveloped strand within mainstream IR theorising. Dyadic analysis continues to dominate both quantitative conflict studies, which typically code interactions at the dyad-year level, and qualitative case-study scholarship, which tends to narrate great-power politics as bilateral contest. This dyadic bias produces two related deficiencies. First, it under-specifies the strategic calculations of third parties who are neither fully allied with nor fully opposed to either pole of a rivalry, yet whose alignment decisions may determine the outcome of that rivalry. Second, it obscures the distinctive bargaining leverage available to an actor who occupies the pivotal position within a triad, what Simmel termed the tertius gaudens, "the third who benefits" (Simmel, 1950, as discussed in Caplow, 1968). The analytical value of triadic structures is not that they replace dyadic analysis, but that they capture strategic dynamics, mediation, coalition switching, and divide-and-rule manipulation, that a two-actor framework cannot, by definition, represent.

Research Questions and Objectives

This article addresses three interrelated research questions. First, to what extent can Simmel's sociology of the triad and Caplow's theory of coalition formation be productively adapted from the microsocial to the macrosocial, and specifically the international, level of analysis? Second, what recurring patterns of coalition formation, pivotal bargaining, and systemic stability does triad theory reveal when applied to historical and contemporary cases of great-power and regional politics? Third, what are the analytical limitations of triadic frameworks, and how might these be addressed through synthesis with other theoretical traditions, including constructivism and domestic-politics approaches? The corresponding objectives are to construct a coherent Simmelian-Caplowian framework for IR application, to test that framework against a range of empirical cases spanning the Cold War to the present, and to offer a critical evaluation that identifies both the explanatory strengths and the boundary conditions of triadic analysis.

This dyadic bias is not merely an artefact of scholarly convention but carries substantive analytical costs. It tends to portray third parties as passive bystanders or, at best, as junior partners whose alignment simply follows from the balance of power between the two principal rivals, rather than as strategic actors capable of independently shaping the outcome of the rivalry through the calculated withholding or extension of support. It further tends to obscure the possibility that an ostensibly weaker third party may, through skilful pivoting between two stronger rivals, secure disproportionate influence over outcomes that its raw material capabilities would not otherwise predict, a possibility that is central to Simmel's original insight but that dyadic frameworks are structurally unable to accommodate.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to a modest but growing literature that seeks to recover microsociological insights for macro-level IR theorising, complementing structural-realist and constructivist accounts of alliance behaviour with a more fine-grained model of three-actor bargaining. Empirically, it offers a systematic reading of both classical and emergent strategic triangles, including minilateral security arrangements such as AUKUS that have received comparatively little theoretical attention within the triad-theory literature. Practically, the study speaks to policymakers navigating an increasingly multipolar and triangulated international order, in which pivotal diplomacy, the cultivation of a position from which an actor can extract concessions from two rival poles, has become an important instrument of statecraft for middle powers, including African states seeking to balance relationships among major powers.

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Scope and Limitations

The scope of this article is confined to state-centric applications of triad theory in the domain of high politics: great-power rivalry, alliance formation, and regional security complexes. It does not extend systematically to non-state triadic configurations, such as triangular relationships among international organisations, multinational corporations, or transnational advocacy networks, although the discussion section notes this as a promising avenue for future research. The empirical cases selected, the Sino-Soviet-American triangle, tripolar systems more broadly, contemporary great-power triangles, triadic dynamics in regional conflict, and emergent minilateral arrangements, are illustrative rather than exhaustive, chosen for their capacity to demonstrate distinct facets of Simmelian and Caplowian logic. A limitation acknowledged throughout is that triad theory, in its classical form, presumes a bounded three-actor system; its application to genuinely multipolar or networked international structures therefore requires careful qualification, which this article addresses in the discussion section.

Organisation of the Paper

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section Two develops the theoretical framework, elaborating Simmel's dyad-triad distinction and Caplow's coalition typology, and adapting these concepts for macrosocial application. Section Three reviews the literature on triangular diplomacy and tripolarity in IR, situating the present study within existing scholarship and identifying gaps, particularly the paucity of African and Global South perspectives. Section Four outlines the qualitative, theory-driven methodology employed. Section Five applies the framework to five empirical domains. Section Six offers a discussion and critical evaluation of the theory's strengths, limitations, and relevance to the Global South. Section Seven concludes with a summary of findings, theoretical and policy implications, and recommendations for further research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Simmel's Sociology of the Triad

Georg Simmel's contribution to the sociology of small groups rests on a deceptively simple observation: the transition from a dyad (a two-person group) to a triad (a three-person group) produces a qualitative, not merely quantitative, transformation in social structure. In a pure dyad, each actor confronts the other directly; there is no possibility of coalition, mediation, or exclusion, because the group's continued existence depends on both members. The addition of a third actor fundamentally alters this logic. It becomes possible for two members to form a coalition against the third, for the third to mediate between the other two, or for one member to play the other two against each other. Simmel identified several characteristic roles that emerge uniquely within triadic structures. The mediator (Vermittler) intervenes to resolve conflict between the other two parties, deriving social significance from their function as a bridge. The tertius gaudens, or "third who rejoices," occupies a more self-interested position, benefiting passively or actively from the disunity of the other two, whether by exploiting their competition for the tertius's favour or by profiting from concessions each is willing to make to secure the tertius's support. The strategy of divide et impera (divide and rule) describes a more active manipulation, in which one actor deliberately fosters or exploits discord between the other two to consolidate its own dominance (Simmel, 1950).

Simmel further observed that triads exhibit an inherent instability absent from dyads: the tendency for two members to coalesce against the third, transforming the triad functionally into a "one plus two" configuration. This tendency toward coalition is not incidental but structural, arising from the strategic incentives that a third position inevitably creates. It is this structural propensity toward coalition, and its predictability, that Theodore Caplow subsequently formalised.

Caplow's Theory of Coalitions in the Triad

Caplow's theory of coalitions extends Simmel's qualitative insight into a more systematic, power-based model. Building on experimental small-group research, Caplow classified triads according to the distribution of power among their three members and derived predictions about which coalitions were most likely to form (Caplow,

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1956, 1968). In configurations of unequal power, where one actor possesses more power than the other two combined, no stable coalition against the dominant actor is possible, and the system tends toward continued dominance by the strongest member. In configurations where power is more evenly distributed, particularly where two weaker actors can combine to overmatch the strongest, Caplow predicted the formation of a "weak coalition" of the two lesser powers against the strongest, the classic "two against one" pattern. Caplow's typology thus offers a set of falsifiable propositions about coalition behaviour contingent on the relative power distribution among the three parties, propositions that have subsequently been tested not only in small-group laboratory settings but, as discussed below, in the analysis of international alliance systems.

From Microsociology to Macrosociology: Adapting the Theory

The adaptation of Simmelian and Caplowian insights from the microsocial level of interpersonal interaction to the macrosocial level of international politics requires several conceptual moves. First, the "actor" in the international application is the state (or, more broadly, any unitary strategic actor such as an alliance bloc), rather than the individual. This substitution is consistent with the long-standing IR convention, most closely associated with structural realism, of treating states as unitary rational actors for analytical purposes, while remaining attentive to the limitations this simplification imposes (Waltz, 1979). Second, "power" in the international application is typically operationalised through composite measures of military capability, economic weight, and diplomatic influence, rather than the more narrowly defined resource endowments of laboratory coalition experiments. Third, the temporal dynamics of international triads are considerably more protracted than those of small-group experiments, unfolding over years or decades rather than minutes, which introduces path dependence, reputational effects, and domestic political constraints largely absent from Caplow's original model. Notwithstanding these adaptations, the core logic, that three-actor systems generate structurally distinct incentives for mediation, coalition, and manipulation that two-actor systems cannot, transfers with considerable interpretive power to the study of international politics.

Key Concepts

Strategic triangle: a configuration of three states (or blocs) whose foreign policies toward one another are interdependent, such that a shift in the relationship between any two members alters the strategic position of the third (Dittmer, 1981).

Pivot: the actor within a triangle capable of improving its relative position by adjusting its alignment between the other two, typically enjoying more cordial relations with each of the other two than they enjoy with each other.

Romantic triangle: in Dittmer's typology, a configuration in which the pivot maintains amicable relations with two actors who are themselves antagonistic to one another (Dittmer, 1981).

Stable marriage: a triangular configuration in which two actors maintain a firm alignment while jointly treating the third as an adversary; analogous to Caplow's strong two-against-one coalition.

Tripolar system: a systemic-level configuration in which international power is concentrated among three roughly comparable poles, generating coalition dynamics distinct from both bipolar and multipolar systems (Schweller, 1998).

The Theoretical Bridge: Mechanisms Linking Simmelian Sociology to Strategic Triangles

The preceding sections establish the conceptual vocabulary of Simmelian and Caplowian triad theory; this section makes explicit the theoretical bridge connecting that microsociological vocabulary to the macrosocial language of strategic triangles, since the burden of any theory-transfer exercise is to specify not merely analogy but mechanism. Three mechanisms perform this bridging work.

The first is the structural-position mechanism. Simmel's insight that social structure, rather than individual attribute, generates strategic opportunity transfers directly to the international level because a state's

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bargaining leverage within a triangle is a function of its position relative to the other two, independent of its absolute capability. A middle power occupying the pivot position between two larger rivals can extract concessions disproportionate to its material power, precisely because the structural position it occupies, not its intrinsic strength, is the source of its leverage. This mechanism explains why weaker states frequently punch above their material weight when they successfully occupy a tertius gaudens position, a pattern that is difficult to account for on purely material grounds.

The second is the coalition-incentive mechanism, derived directly from Caplow. The relative power distribution among the three parties generates a calculable incentive structure for coalition formation, such that the mechanism translating sociological observation into IR prediction is the rational calculation, by each party, of whether joining a coalition against one of the other two yields a more favourable payoff than either neutrality or a rival coalition. This mechanism is what converts Caplow's descriptive typology (Section 2.2) into a predictive tool applicable to alliance formation, and it is the mechanism operationalised in the propositions set out in Section 2.6 below.

The third is the relational-interdependence mechanism. Because a strategic triangle is defined (Section 2.4) as a configuration in which a shift in any one bilateral relationship alters the strategic position of the third party, the mechanism linking Simmel's dyad-triad distinction to observable IR outcomes is the transmission of relational change: a rapprochement between two parties necessarily, and often rapidly, alters the calculus of the excluded third, even absent any direct interaction between the third party and the change itself. These three mechanisms, structural position, coalition incentive, and relational interdependence, together constitute the bridge by which Simmel's and Caplow's microsociological categories translate into testable claims about state behaviour.

Testable Propositions

Building on the mechanisms specified above, the framework developed in this article yields five propositions that are, in principle, amenable to empirical testing across a larger sample of historical and contemporary triangles than the illustrative cases examined in Section Five. They are framed as comparative, probabilistic claims rather than deterministic laws, consistent with Caplow's own framing of coalition formation as a matter of differential likelihood rather than certainty.

Proposition 1 (power-asymmetry proposition): where one actor's power exceeds the combined power of the other two, no durable coalition against the dominant actor will form, and the system will instead exhibit continued dominance by the strongest party (derived from Caplow, 1956, 1968).

Proposition 2 (near-equality proposition): where power is approximately equally distributed among the three parties, the system will exhibit a structurally elevated probability of coalition formation between two of the parties against the third, relative to systems characterised by marked power asymmetry.

Proposition 3 (pivot-leverage proposition): an actor occupying the pivot position in a romantic-triangle configuration will secure diplomatic or material concessions from each of the other two parties disproportionate to its independent material capability, for as long as the antagonism between those two parties persists.

Proposition 4 (relational-transmission proposition): a significant improvement in relations between any two members of a strategic triangle will produce, within a bounded time horizon, an observable adjustment, whether conciliatory or confrontational, in the excluded third party's posture toward one or both of the other two.

Proposition 5 (tripolar-instability proposition): tripolar systems will exhibit a higher baseline probability of transition to either bipolarity, through successful coalition and the effective elimination of one pole, or multipolarity, through the emergence of additional poles, than either bipolar or four-or-more-actor multipolar systems will exhibit transitions toward tripolarity.

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These propositions do not exhaust the predictive content of the framework, but they specify, for future researchers, the observable conditions under which triad theory's claims could in principle be disconfirmed, addressing a recurring criticism that triadic analysis in IR has remained largely descriptive rather than genuinely predictive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Sociological Foundations

The foundational literature on triadic structures originates in Simmel's essays on group size and social differentiation, later compiled and translated in Kurt Wolff's edition of Simmel's sociology (Simmel, 1950). Caplow's subsequent formalisation, developed initially in a 1956 article and elaborated in his 1968 monograph on two-against-one coalitions, translated Simmel's qualitative typology into a testable, power-contingent model of coalition formation (Caplow, 1956, 1968). Subsequent small-group research within sociology and social psychology, including the experimental coalition studies of William Gamson (1961), broadly corroborated Caplow's central predictions while refining the conditions under which weak coalitions form, particularly the role of communication and negotiated side-payments among coalition partners.

Introduction of Triangular Analysis into IR

The migration of triadic logic into International Relations owes much to the practice of Cold War diplomacy itself. Henry Kissinger's pursuit of "triangular diplomacy" in the early 1970s, the calculated opening to the People's Republic of China as a means of gaining leverage over the Soviet Union within the broader Sino-Soviet-American triangle, provided a vivid practical demonstration of tertius gaudens logic at the level of grand strategy (Kissinger, 1979). This diplomatic practice subsequently attracted systematic theoretical attention. Lowell Dittmer's 1981 article, widely regarded as the foundational text of IR triad theory, formalised a typology of triangular configurations, including the "romantic triangle," the "stable marriage," and the "unit veto", and specified the conditions under which each configuration tends to be stable or unstable (Dittmer, 1981). Dittmer's framework has since served as the principal reference point for subsequent triadic scholarship in the field.

Applications to Tripolarity and Alliance Behaviour

Randall Schweller's work on tripolarity represents the most systematic effort to integrate Caplowian coalition theory with structural-realist balance-of-power theorising (Schweller, 1998). Schweller argued that tripolar systems are inherently prone to instability because each of the three poles has a rational incentive to combine with one other pole against the third, in the hope of eliminating a competitor and transforming the system into a more favourable bipolar configuration, a dynamic he traced through historical cases including the diplomacy preceding the Second World War. This literature intersects with a broader body of alliance theory, including Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory (Walt, 1987) and Glenn Snyder's work on alliance politics (Snyder, 1997), both of which, while not explicitly Simmelian in derivation, address closely related questions of coalition formation, abandonment, and entrapment that resonate strongly with Caplow's predictions.

Contemporary Studies on Strategic Triangles

A more recent wave of scholarship has applied triangular frameworks to the emerging multipolar order of the twenty-first century. Analysts have examined the evolving United States–China–Russia triangle as a partial inversion of the Cold War configuration, with Russia and China increasingly aligned against the United States rather than serving, as China once did, as the pivot within the triangle (see, e.g., discussions in contemporary IR commentary informed by Dittmer's typology). Parallel scholarship has examined the United States-India-China triangle in the context of the Indo-Pacific, and the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral as an instance of institutionalised triangular cooperation that coexists uneasily with bilateral rivalries among its members, particularly the India-China border dispute. This literature demonstrates the continued relevance of triadic analysis to contemporary great-power competition, even as it reveals the increasing complexity introduced by cross-cutting economic interdependence and multilateral institutions that classical triad theory did not anticipate.

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Gaps in the Literature

Notwithstanding this substantial body of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, the literature on triad theory in IR remains heavily concentrated on great-power triangles, with comparatively little systematic attention to regional and sub-systemic triadic configurations outside the traditional East Asian and South Asian contexts. Second, and most pertinently for this article, African and Global South perspectives are strikingly underrepresented within the triad-theory literature, despite the evident relevance of triangular dynamics to African states' diplomatic engagement with competing external powers, for instance, the triangulation many African governments practise among the United States, China, and, increasingly, other actors such as Russia, the Gulf states, or the European Union. Third, existing applications of Caplow's coalition typology to international politics have tended to remain descriptive rather than fully specifying the power-distribution thresholds under which particular coalition outcomes become likely, leaving considerable scope for more rigorous operationalisation. This article does not claim to close these gaps definitively but seeks to contribute toward the first and third by offering a systematic framework and by flagging avenues for Global South application in the discussion section.

A related methodological gap concerns the operationalisation of triangular relationships beyond the great-power cases most frequently examined. Emerging scholarship has begun to explore China's own deployment of triangular strategies vis-a-vis regional neighbours, while other work has considered triadic dynamics within the European Union's relations with Russia and the United States. These contributions, while valuable, remain scattered rather than cumulative, in part because the field lacks a shared operational vocabulary bridging Simmel's original sociological categories and the empirical indicators, alliance treaties, trade dependence, diplomatic visit frequency, and so forth, that IR scholars typically use to code alignment. This article's framework, developed in Section Two and applied in Section Five, represents one attempt to supply such a bridge, though it does not claim to resolve the measurement challenges that a fully quantitative triadic research programme would require.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, theory-driven, case-study methodology appropriate to its conceptual and interpretive objectives. Rather than testing hypotheses through large-N statistical analysis, the study proceeds by applying the Simmelian-Caplowian categories developed in Section Two, mediator, tertius gaudens, divide et impera, and Caplow's power-contingent coalition predictions, to a purposively selected set of historical and contemporary cases. This approach follows established practice in theory-building case-study research within IR, in which cases are selected not for statistical representativeness but for their capacity to illuminate, test the boundaries of, and refine a theoretical framework (George & Bennett, 2005).

The primary sources for this analysis are secondary scholarly literature on the cases examined, supplemented by historical accounts and, where relevant, official diplomatic documents and statements. The analytical method proceeds in three steps for each case: first, identifying the three principal actors constituting the triadic configuration and assessing the approximate distribution of power among them; second, applying Dittmer's typology to classify the configuration (romantic triangle, stable marriage, or unit veto); and third, evaluating the extent to which observed coalition behaviour and diplomatic outcomes correspond to the predictions generated by Caplow's coalition theory.

This structured, comparative approach allows the article to draw cross-case observations regarding the explanatory power and limitations of triad theory while remaining attentive to the historical specificity of each case.

Application of Triad Theory in International Relations

The Classic Strategic Triangle: United States-Soviet Union-China (1970s-1980s)

The Sino-Soviet-American triangle of the 1970s and 1980s remains the paradigmatic case of triadic dynamics in modern IR practice and the case from which the very vocabulary of "triangular diplomacy" derives. Following the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the erstwhile communist dyad fractured into

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a triad in which the United States occupied a potentially pivotal position. The Nixon administration's opening to China in 1971-1972, orchestrated principally by Kissinger, exemplified a deliberate strategy to occupy the tertius gaudens role: by improving relations with Beijing, Washington increased its leverage over Moscow, both by raising the spectre of Sino-American coordination against Soviet interests and by exploiting the pre-existing Sino-Soviet antagonism (Kissinger, 1979). In Dittmer's typology, the configuration approximated a "romantic triangle" from the American perspective, with the United States cultivating amicable relations with both Beijing and, through détente, Moscow, while the Sino-Soviet dyad itself remained openly hostile.

Caplow's coalition logic offers a complementary reading. Prior to 1971, the nominal communist bloc concealed an underlying power asymmetry between the Soviet Union and China that made a stable anti-American coalition between them increasingly untenable, particularly following border clashes in 1969. Washington's strategic opening exploited precisely this latent instability, engineering a configuration in which the two weaker relationships (Washington-Beijing and Washington-Moscow) could each be leveraged against the more hostile Sino-Soviet dyad. The result was not a formal coalition in Caplow's strict sense but a diplomatic realignment that functionally replicated the strategic benefits Caplow's theory associates with occupying the advantaged position in an unequal triad.

Tripolar Systems and Coalition Formation: Schweller's Application of Caplow

Schweller's tripolarity model extends Caplow's insight to the systemic level, arguing that tripolar international systems are characterised by a structural incentive for two of the three poles to combine against the third, with the objective of eliminating a rival and converting the system into a more manageable bipolar order (Schweller, 1998). Schweller traced this dynamic through the diplomacy of the 1930s, in which the tripolar distribution of power among the major European states, alongside a resurgent Germany, generated precisely the kind of coalition incentives Caplow's model would predict, ultimately contributing to the polarisation that preceded the Second World War. Schweller's central theoretical contribution is the claim that tripolarity is inherently less stable than bipolarity, a proposition that directly extends Caplow's finding that near-equal three-actor power distributions generate strong incentives toward destabilising two-against-one coalitions, whereas a dominant single actor (as in a bipolar system's internal logic, where each pole is itself often treated as a unitary bloc) forecloses this coalition dynamic.

Contemporary Strategic Triangles: US-China-Russia, US-India-China, Russia-India-China

Contemporary great-power politics exhibits several overlapping strategic triangles whose configurations differ markedly from the Cold War prototype. The United States-China-Russia triangle has, since approximately the mid-2010s, arguably inverted the structural logic of its Cold War predecessor: rather than the United States occupying the pivotal tertius gaudens position, deepening strategic and economic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, accelerated by the deterioration of both countries' relations with Washington, has arguably positioned China, or in some readings neither pole but a loosely aligned Sino-Russian axis, as the beneficiary of Western preoccupation with two simultaneous rivalries. This configuration approximates what Dittmer's typology would classify as a "unit veto" triangle tending toward a "stable marriage," in which two members (China and Russia) maintain a firm, if not formally allied, alignment against the third (the United States).

The United States-India-China triangle in the Indo-Pacific presents a different configuration, in which India has increasingly, though not unambiguously, aligned with the United States (including through minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) in response to its own bilateral tensions with China, particularly along the disputed Himalayan border. This suggests a drift toward a stable-marriage configuration between Washington and New Delhi directed against Beijing, though India's continued strategic autonomy and its participation in China-inclusive institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation complicate any straightforward classification.

The Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, revived periodically as a forum for coordination among the three powers, illustrates the tension between institutionalised cooperation and underlying bilateral antagonism that Caplow's model would predict to be unstable. Despite formal RIC cooperation, the persistent India-China border dispute constrains the depth of trilateral alignment, such that RIC functions less as a genuine coalition

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in Caplow's sense than as a forum within which India seeks to preserve strategic flexibility, arguably positioning itself, within this narrower trilateral frame, closer to a pivot than to a committed coalition partner.

Triadic Deterrence and Third-Party Influence in Regional Conflicts

Beyond great-power politics, triadic dynamics recur within regional security complexes, where a third-party actor's alignment decisions can determine the deterrence balance between two rival states. The India-Pakistan dyad, for instance, cannot be adequately understood without reference to China's role as a third actor whose military and economic support for Pakistan, and whose own unresolved border disputes with India, transform a nominally bilateral rivalry into a triadic security complex with distinctive escalation and deterrence dynamics. Similarly, external great-power involvement in African and Middle Eastern regional conflicts frequently assumes a triadic character, in which a third-party patron's calibration of support between two local rivals functions analogously to Simmel's tertius gaudens, extracting diplomatic or economic concessions from both parties in exchange for continued or withheld backing. Such cases demonstrate that triadic logic operates not only at the systemic level of great-power competition but also within regional and sub-regional security architectures.

Emerging Trilateral Arrangements: AUKUS, RIC, and Their Coalition Logic

The formation of AUKUS in 2021, the trilateral security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, most prominently involving the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia, offers a contemporary instance of Caplowian coalition formation, though of a markedly different character from the covert-manipulation model associated with classical triangular diplomacy. AUKUS represents a formal, institutionalised strong coalition among three power-asymmetric actors (the United States possessing markedly greater capability than either Australia or the United Kingdom) directed explicitly against a fourth external actor, China, situating it partially outside the strict three-actor frame of classical triad theory while nonetheless exhibiting recognisably Caplowian logic in its internal power distribution: the two comparatively weaker partners bind themselves formally to the stronger partner rather than attempting a coalition against it, consistent with Caplow's prediction that no stable coalition against a sufficiently dominant actor is likely to form. The RIC trilateral, discussed above, by contrast, illustrates a coalition of nominally comparable powers whose cohesion remains constrained by unresolved bilateral antagonism, again consistent with Caplow's expectation that near-equal power distributions generate more volatile coalition dynamics than markedly unequal ones. Taken together, these cases suggest that the coalition logic Caplow derived from small-group experiments retains predictive value even for contemporary, highly institutionalised minilateral security arrangements, provided the analyst attends carefully to the underlying power distribution among the parties involved.

It is worth noting that the durability of the Sino-Soviet-American triangle depended heavily on the willingness of all three parties to accept a degree of strategic ambiguity regarding the ultimate trajectory of each bilateral relationship. Washington's tilt toward Beijing did not preclude continued, if wary, engagement with Moscow through arms-control negotiations such as SALT I, illustrating that occupation of the pivot position need not entail the wholesale abandonment of the third relationship, but rather its careful management alongside the newly cultivated one. This observation qualifies Dittmer's romantic-triangle typology by suggesting that pivots frequently pursue simultaneous, differentiated engagement with both other parties rather than a simple binary shift of allegiance, a nuance that subsequent applications of the framework to contemporary cases would do well to preserve.

Schweller's analysis further suggests that the instability he identifies in tripolar systems is not merely a function of the number of poles but of the specific incentive structure Caplow's theory predicts: each pole calculates that eliminating one rival through coalition is preferable to indefinite three-way competition, because a resulting bipolar system, however adversarial, is more predictable and less costly to manage than a tripolar one in which any two of the three might combine against the observer at any time. This logic helps explain why tripolar systems have historically proven transitional rather than durable, tending either to collapse into bipolarity through successful coalition and elimination, as Schweller argues occurred in the run-

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up to 1939, or to evolve toward multipolarity as additional poles emerge to offset the destabilising coalition dynamics inherent in a pure three-actor configuration.

Comparative Analysis Across Power Configurations and Geopolitical Contexts

The five cases examined above span markedly different power configurations and geopolitical contexts, and a systematic comparison across them sharpens the inferences that can be drawn from any single case in isolation. Table 1 summarises each case according to its approximate power configuration, its geopolitical setting, the dominant Simmelian or Caplowian mechanism at work, and the observed outcome pattern.

Case	Power Configuration	Geopolitical Context	Dominant Mechanism	Outcome Pattern
US–USSR–China (1970s–80s)	Unequal; two superpowers, one weaker pivot	Cold War, East Asia	Pivot leverage (tertius gaudens)	US gains leverage over USSR via China opening
Pre-1939 European tripolarity (Schweller)	Near-equal among major poles	Interwar Europe	Coalition incentive (two-against-one)	System transitions toward bipolar conflict
US–China–Russia (contemporary)	Shifting toward China–Russia parity vs. US	Global, post–Cold War	Coalition incentive; relational interdependence	Sino-Russian alignment approximating a stable marriage against the US
US–India–China	Asymmetric; India rising	Indo-Pacific	Pivot leverage; partial alignment	India drifts toward the US while retaining strategic autonomy
Russia–India–China (RIC)	Formally near-equal; undercut by bilateral rivalry	Eurasia	Relational interdependence constrained by antagonism	Institutional cooperation without a true coalition
AUKUS	Markedly unequal; US dominant	Indo-Pacific	Power-asymmetry (no coalition against the dominant actor)	Formal strong coalition binding weaker partners to the dominant actor

Note. Table constructed by the author from the case analysis in Section 5.

Read comparatively, the cases corroborate the power-contingent logic specified in Propositions 1, 2, and 5. Where power was markedly unequal and concentrated in a single actor, as in AUKUS, no coalition formed against the dominant party; weaker partners instead bound themselves formally to it, consistent with Proposition 1. Where power was closer to parity among the three poles, as in the interwar European case and, arguably, in the contemporary US–China–Russia triangle, coalition dynamics of the kind anticipated by Proposition 2 became considerably more pronounced, whether realised, as in the 1930s, or still unfolding, as in the present. The comparison also reveals that geopolitical context conditions how cleanly these predictions manifest: in regions where cross-cutting economic interdependence and multilateral institutions are dense, as in the RIC and the broader Indo-Pacific setting, the coalition and pivot dynamics predicted by the framework remain visible but are attenuated, producing institutionalised cooperation that falls short of a true coalition rather than the sharper binary alignments observed in the Cold War cases. This pattern suggests that triad theory's predictive power is strongest in settings of relatively sparse institutionalisation and weakens, without

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disappearing, as the density of cross-cutting ties among the three parties increases, a qualification that subsequent applications of the framework should build into their expectations.

DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL EVALUATION

Taken together, these five applications suggest that the coalition logic embedded in triad theory operates across markedly different institutional settings, from covert Cold War diplomacy, through systemic-level polarity analysis, to formal treaty-based minilateralism, while retaining a recognisably consistent underlying structure. In each case, the analytically decisive variable is not simply the number of actors involved but the distribution of power among them and the degree to which that distribution permits a stable coalition to form against the strongest party. This consistency across cases lends support to the claim that triad theory captures a genuine structural feature of international politics rather than a coincidental pattern specific to any single historical period.

Strengths of Triad Theory

The preceding application demonstrates several distinctive strengths of triad theory as an analytical lens for International Relations. First, it provides a parsimonious yet powerful vocabulary, mediator, tertius gaudens, divide et impera, for capturing strategic dynamics that dyadic analysis cannot, by definition, represent, particularly the pivotal bargaining leverage available to an actor positioned advantageously between two rivals. Second, Caplow's power-contingent coalition predictions offer a degree of analytical rigour and falsifiability that purely descriptive accounts of alliance behaviour often lack, generating testable expectations regarding which coalitions are likely to form under specified power distributions. Third, and relatedly, the framework offers useful purchase on questions of systemic stability, as demonstrated by Schweller's extension of Caplow's logic to explain the comparative instability of tripolar systems relative to bipolar ones, a contribution that meaningfully complements, rather than merely restates, existing structural-realist theorising.

Limitations

Notwithstanding these strengths, triad theory as applied to International Relations exhibits significant limitations. First, and most fundamentally, the theory's clean three-actor framing becomes strained when applied to genuinely multipolar systems involving four or more significant actors, or to networked international structures in which bilateral and minilateral relationships overlap in ways that resist reduction to a single bounded triad, the contemporary United States-China-Russia-India-EU configuration, for instance, arguably comprises multiple overlapping triangles rather than a single coherent one. Second, the theory's origins in rational, unitary-actor small-group experiments mean that it has comparatively little to say about domestic political constraints on alignment decisions, electoral pressures, bureaucratic politics, or public opinion, that frequently shape state behaviour in ways that a purely structural coalition model cannot capture. Third, the framework is largely silent on ideational and normative factors, such as shared identity, ideology, or historical memory, that constructivist scholarship has shown to exert independent influence on alliance cohesion and coalition formation, sometimes overriding the material-power calculations central to Caplow's model. Fourth, the theory has comparatively little to say about non-state actors, multinational corporations, transnational networks, or international organizations, whose growing influence on triangular dynamics, for instance through economic interdependence that constrains coalition-switching, is not well captured by a state-centric coalition framework.

It is important to be explicit about the first of these limitations, since the theory's core vocabulary, mediator, tertius gaudens, divide et impera, and Caplow's coalition typology, is developed for exactly three actors and does not, without modification, extend to situations involving four or more significant parties. This article's response to that constraint is twofold. First, where a larger configuration can be decomposed into multiple overlapping triads, each sharing one member with the others, as in the five-actor United States-China-Russia-India-EU configuration noted above, the framework can be applied separately to each embedded triad, with the understanding that a shift in one triad's equilibrium may propagate, via the shared member, into the others; this decomposition strategy is consistent with the relational-interdependence mechanism specified in Section 2.5 but requires the analyst to track multiple triads simultaneously rather than treating the system as a single

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bounded unit. Second, where such decomposition is not feasible, because power is dispersed across so many parties that no bounded three-actor subset captures the dominant dynamics, triad theory should be understood to reach the limit of its explanatory reach, and the analyst should turn instead to genuinely systemic, n-actor frameworks, such as standard multipolarity theory, for which triad theory is a complement rather than a substitute. The propositions in Section 2.6 are accordingly scoped to apply within a given triad or embedded set of triads, not to the international system as an undifferentiated whole.

Relevance to African and Global South Contexts

As noted in the literature review, African and Global South perspectives remain markedly underrepresented within the existing triad-theory literature, despite the evident relevance of triangular dynamics to the diplomatic practice of African states. Many African governments today engage in forms of strategic triangulation among competing external partners, most visibly the United States and China, but increasingly also Russia, the Gulf states, the European Union, and India, seeking to occupy something approximating a collective pivot position from which concessions, investment, and security cooperation can be extracted from multiple external patrons simultaneously. This pattern resonates strongly with the tertius gaudens logic identified by Simmel, albeit refracted through the distinctive postcolonial context of asymmetric dependency that classical triad theory, developed without reference to colonial or postcolonial power relations, does not directly address. A promising avenue for future research, noted further in the conclusion, would examine whether African states' triangulation strategies vis-à-vis major external powers conform to Caplow's coalition predictions, or whether the structural asymmetries of postcolonial dependency generate distinctive patterns that require theoretical modification of the classical framework.

Toward a Synthetic Approach

The limitations identified above suggest that triad theory is most productively deployed not as a freestanding, all-encompassing explanation of international outcomes but as one analytical layer within a broader, synthetic approach to IR theorising. Structural realism supplies the systemic context of relative power distributions within which triadic coalition incentives operate; constructivism supplies attention to the identity- and norm-based factors that may reinforce or override those incentives; and domestic-politics approaches supply the unit-level constraints that determine whether a state's leadership is politically able to act on the coalition logic that a purely structural analysis would predict. Understood in this way, triad theory functions less as a competitor to these established traditions than as a specification device, a set of categories that sharpens the analyst's attention to the particular strategic possibilities, mediation, exploitation, and coalition, that become available once a dyadic relationship is joined by a third consequential actor. This synthetic positioning also addresses, in part, the critique that triad theory oversimplifies multipolar systems: rather than insisting that every international configuration be reduced to a single bounded triad, the analyst can instead identify the multiple, possibly overlapping triads embedded within a larger multipolar system and apply Simmelian and Caplowian categories to each in turn, while relying on structural and constructivist theorising to explain how these embedded triads interact.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Georg Simmel's sociology of the triad and Theodore Caplow's theory of coalition formation, though developed within microsociology, offer significant and underexploited analytical value for International Relations. By adapting Simmel's categories of mediator, tertius gaudens, and divide et impera, alongside Caplow's power-contingent predictions of coalition formation, the article has developed a framework capable of illuminating strategic dynamics that dyadic analysis, still dominant within the discipline, cannot adequately capture. Applied across five empirical domains, the classic Sino-Soviet-American triangle, Schweller's tripolarity model, contemporary great-power triangles, triadic dynamics in regional conflict, and emergent minilateral arrangements such as AUKUS, the framework demonstrated consistent explanatory purchase on patterns of pivotal diplomacy, coalition formation, and systemic (in)stability, while also revealing important boundary conditions, particularly with respect to multipolar complexity, domestic politics, ideational variables, and non-state actors.

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Theoretically, the article suggests that triad theory is best understood not as a rival to structural realism or constructivism but as a complementary meso-level framework that specifies the strategic logic of three-actor bargaining more precisely than either broader tradition typically attempts. Its predictive claims regarding coalition formation under specified power distributions offer a valuable corrective to purely descriptive accounts of alliance politics. In policy terms, the analysis underscores the continued relevance of pivotal, tertius gaudens-style diplomacy as an instrument available to middle powers, including African states, seeking to maximise strategic autonomy amid great-power competition, while cautioning that the sustainability of such pivotal positioning depends heavily on the underlying power distribution among the parties involved, as Caplow's model would predict.

Further research might usefully pursue three directions. First, more rigorous operationalisation of Caplow's power-distribution thresholds, potentially through structured, focused comparison across a larger sample of historical triangles, would strengthen the theory's predictive precision. Second, systematic examination of African and Global South triangulation strategies vis-à-vis competing external powers would address a significant gap in the existing literature and test whether postcolonial dependency structures modify classical coalition predictions. Third, extension of the framework to non-state and networked configurations, including triangular relationships among international organisations, multinational corporations, and transnational advocacy coalitions, would help determine the outer boundaries of triadic analysis in an increasingly complex, multipolar, and non-state-inflected international system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Caplow's Typology of Triadic Power Configurations

Type	Power Distribution (Illustrative)	Predicted Coalition Outcome
Type I	A = B = C (equal power)	Any two may coalesce against the third; highly unstable
Type II	A > B = C	B and C form a coalition against A
Type III	A > B > C, A < B + C	B and C coalesce against A
Type IV	A = B > C	Unstable; A–C or B–C coalition possible depending on incentives
Type V	A > B > C, A > B + C	No stable coalition forms against A; A dominates
Type VI	A = B + C	Coalition of B and C exactly balances A; highly contingent outcome

Note. Adapted from Caplow's (1956, 1968) power-contingent coalition typology.

Appendix B: Dittmer's Typology of Strategic Triangles

Configuration	Description
Ménage à trios	All three actors maintain roughly amicable relations with one another; a rare and inherently unstable configuration.
Romantic triangle	One actor (the pivot) maintains amicable relations with both other actors, who are themselves antagonistic toward one another.
Stable marriage	Two actors maintain a firm alignment and jointly treat the third as an adversary.
Unit veto	All three actors maintain mutually antagonistic or wary relations with one another.

Note. Adapted from Dittmer (1981).