

Authority, Ascendancy, and Supremacy: A Comprehensive Analysis of the China-Russia-USA Power Triad

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In the contemporary landscape of international relations, the shifting paradigms of power are no longer defined solely by military might or territorial conquest. Instead, as explored in the seminal work *Authority, Ascendancy, and Supremacy: China, Russia, and the United States' Pursuit of Relevancy and Power*, the global order is shaped by a complex interplay of legitimacy, momentum, and structural dominance. This article provides an in-depth technical analysis of how the 'Big 3'—the United States, China, and the Russian Federation—compete for global influence in the post-Cold War era.

The Theoretical Framework: Authority, Ascendancy, and Supremacy

To understand the current geopolitical friction, one must first define the three core pillars of national power as theorized by scholars like Gregory O. Hall. These concepts represent different stages and types of influence that a nation-state can exert on the international stage.

1. Authority: The Bedrock of Legitimacy

Authority is defined as the recognized right to lead. It is not merely the possession of power, but the acceptance of that power by other actors in the system. In the context of the United States, authority has been derived from the 'Liberal International Order,' a series of institutions (UN, IMF, World Bank) and norms (democracy, free trade) established after World War II. When a state possesses authority, its actions are viewed as legitimate, reducing the 'cost' of enforcement.

2. Ascendancy: The Momentum of Influence

Ascendancy refers to a state's upward trajectory. It is a dynamic state of increasing influence, often driven by rapid economic growth, technological innovation, and expanding diplomatic networks. China is the quintessential example of an ascending power. Through initiatives like the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, China is building the infrastructure of future influence, moving from a regional player to a global heavyweight.

3. Supremacy: The Zenith of Structural Power

Supremacy represents the highest rank in the international hierarchy. A supreme power has the capacity to set the rules of the game and penalize those who break them. While the United States has enjoyed a period of unipolar supremacy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of a 'multipolar' reality suggests that supremacy is now a contested space rather than a guaranteed status.

The Tripartite Competition: Strategic Profiles

The competition between the Big 3 is not a monolithic struggle but a series of overlapping strategic pursuits. Each nation utilizes different 'power levers' to achieve its goals of relevancy and dominance.

The United States: Maintaining Hegemonic Stability

The U.S. strategy focuses on maintaining its existing **Authority**. This involves strengthening alliances (NATO, AUKUS, Quad) and reinforcing the rule-based order. However, the U.S. faces the 'Heckscher-Ohlin' challenge of globalization, where domestic economic shifts can undermine the political will to maintain global leadership. The

technical challenge for the U.S. is transitioning from a 19th-century 'Hub and Spoke' alliance model to a 21st-century 'Integrated Network' model.

China: The Pursuit of Comprehensive National Power (CNP)

China utilizes a metric known as **Comprehensive National Power (CNP)**, which includes quantitative measures of GDP, R&D investment, and military capability. China's ascendancy is built on the integration of its economy into global supply chains, making it indispensable to both friends and rivals. This 'Economic Interdependence' is used as a tool of statecraft, where access to the Chinese market is traded for political alignment.

Russia: Strategic Relevancy and Asymmetric Supremacy

Russia, lacking the economic volume of the U.S. or China, pursues **Relevancy** through asymmetric means. This includes energy geopolitics (utilizing natural gas exports to Europe as leverage), sophisticated cyber operations, and military interventions in strategic 'near-abroad' regions. Russia's goal is to ensure it cannot be ignored in any major global decision, effectively demanding a seat at the table of supreme powers.

Technical Analysis: Measuring National Capability

To objectively compare these powers, political scientists often use the **Composite Index of National Capability (CINC)**. This formula aggregates six components: total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military expenditures, and military personnel.

The simplified logic for calculating a state's share of world power is represented by the formula:

CINC Score = (1/6) * " (State Component / World Total Component)

Comparative Power Matrix

The following table illustrates the comparative strengths of the Big 3 across key technical and economic indicators (approximated data for conceptual analysis):

Metric	United States	China	Russia
Primary Power Type	Institutional/Financial	Manufacturing/Infrastructure	Energy/Military-Kinetic
Reserve Currency	USD (Dominant)	RMB (Rising)	Rubel (Localized)
Allied Network	60+ Treaty Allies	Economic Partners (BRI)	CSTO / Tactical Partners
Technological Focus	Software, AI, Aerospace	5G, EV, Green Tech	Hypersonics, Cyber, Nuclear
Geopolitical Goal	Order Maintenance	Regional Hegemony	Multipolarity/Status

Core Mechanics of Modern Geopolitics

The pursuit of power in the 21st century relies on several technical mechanisms that go beyond traditional warfare. These are the tools through which authority and ascendancy are built.

1. Financial Statecraft and Sanctions Architecture

The U.S. exerts authority through the **SWIFT** banking system. By decoupling a nation from this system, the U.S. can exercise 'financial supremacy' without firing a shot. In response, China and Russia are developing alternative payment systems (CIPS and SPFS) to insulate themselves from Western financial coercion.

2. The 'Malacca Dilemma' and Maritime Logistics

For China, ascendancy is threatened by its dependence on the Malacca Strait for energy imports. This has led to the technical execution of the **'String of Pearls'** strategy—developing deep-water ports in the Indian Ocean (Gwadar, Hambantota) to secure logistics lines. This is a clear procedural move to transition from regional relevancy to maritime supremacy.

3. Hybrid Warfare and Information Dominance

Russia's 'Gerasimov Doctrine' emphasizes the use of non-military means to achieve political goals. This involves a technical workflow of:

Information Preparation: Using social media algorithms to polarize target populations.

Economic Pressure: Manipulating energy prices or supply chains.

Tactical Deception: Using 'little green men' or deniable proxy forces.

Practical Implementation: Building a State's Relevancy

For emerging nations or those looking to pivot their strategy, the transition from being a 'subject' of the international system to an 'actor' requires a specific procedural framework:

1. Internal Consolidation: Aligning domestic industrial policy with geopolitical goals (e.g., China's 'Made in China 2025').
2. Regional Institution Building: Creating local forums that exclude rivals (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

3. Infrastructure Diplomacy: Providing public goods (roads, satellites, vaccines) to mid-sized powers to build 'Soft Power' equity.

4. Technological Autarky: Reducing dependence on foreign technology stacks (semiconductors, operating systems) to prevent 'Kill-Switch' vulnerabilities.

Case Study: The South China Sea and the Limits of Authority

The South China Sea serves as a critical case study in the clash between **U.S. Authority** and **Chinese Ascendancy**. The U.S. relies on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to assert 'Freedom of Navigation.' China, however, utilizes 'Island Building'—a technical engineering approach to create 'unsinkable aircraft carriers'—to establish a *de facto* supremacy that ignores legal *de jure* authority.

Troubleshooting Geopolitical Failure Modes

When powers overextend, they face predictable failure modes. Technical writers in the field of risk analysis identify these as:

- Imperial Overstretch: When the cost of maintaining authority exceeds the economic output of the state (A risk for the U.S.).
- The Middle-Income Trap: When an ascending power's growth stalls before it achieves supremacy (A risk for China).
- Demographic Collapse: When a state's human capital shrinks, making military and economic relevancy unsustainable (A critical risk for Russia).

Synthesis of the Global Power Shift

The transition from a unipolar world to one defined by the competing interests of China, Russia, and the United States represents a fundamental shift in the mechanics of global governance. Authority is no longer centralized in Washington; it is being redistributed through new economic corridors and technological ecosystems. China's ascendancy is grounded in physical infrastructure and manufacturing dominance, while Russia's pursuit of relevancy utilizes asymmetric disruptions to challenge the status quo.

For policymakers and technical analysts, the takeaway is clear: power is not a static asset but a fluid dynamic. The ability of a nation to maintain its 'Relevancy' depends on its capacity to innovate faster than its rivals can disrupt. As the 'Big 3' continue their pursuit of supremacy, the international system will likely fragment into 'spheres of influence' where different rules apply based on which power holds the local ascendancy. Understanding these technical nuances—from CINC scores to financial messaging systems—is essential for navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the mid-21st century.

Ultimately, the pursuit of power is a pursuit of survival. In a world where 'Supremacy' is contested, 'Authority' is fragile, and 'Ascendancy' is the only way to avoid obsolescence, the competition between China, Russia, and the United States will remain the defining feature of our era.

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