Dealing with an Interdependent and Fragmented World: The Origins of the Trilateral Commission

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In October 2012 I conducted funded research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) on the recently opened Trilateral Commission (North America) records. I am particularly interested in the origins of the Commission and the role of those members who joined the Jimmy Carter administration in 1977. The research is part of a larger project on the origins of globalization during the Cold War and on the contribution of think tanks and other NGO's on the definition of new goals in a rapidly changing world, which emerged in the 1970s.[1]

Stories Yet to be Written: The Trilateral Commission in the Scientific Literature

The previous scientific literature which has dealt with the history of the Trilateral Commission shows two major limitations. The first is related to the growing influence of "conspiracy theories" associated with the Commission and other transnational NGOs. Furthermore, the studies that are based on more rigorous scholarly reconstructions are quite dated, because documents relating to the Commission have only recently become available.[2] My project seeks to chart a new path, by attempting to enrich the traditional political and diplomatic history of the United States with the history of a Non Governmental Organization (NGO), in order to shed new light on an important period in the history of the United States.

Research Project

Between the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s the U.S. military defeat in Vietnam, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the Watergate scandal, all undermined the consensus on *cold war liberalism*. Public opinion and U. S. policymakers had to deal with the limits of American superpower, which was no longer capable to guarantee an unrestrained economic expansion and an absolute anti-communist commitment as well. The demise of the *butter and guns* model produced a broad academic and social debate to define a new political agenda and to restore a wide consensus.[3]

In the spring of 1972 David Rockefeller, inspired by the writings of Zbigniew Brzezinski, proposed the creation of the Trilateral Commission, where academic experts, economists, politicians and journalists from the three poles of the industrialized world—North America, Japan, and Western Europe—could meet to discuss the major problems of the international system in order to improve public understanding of such issues through the support of the media.[4]

According to the participants in the project, since the late 1960s the rigid bipolarism of the previous twenty years was inadequate to the challenges of a more interdependent and fragmented world. Instead of insisting on East-West confrontation through a pragmatic and unilateralist approach, the Trilateral Commission opted for a new agenda. In the first place, the trilateralists focused on North-South relations, particularly on the essential contributions of the "Most Advanced Countries" to the growth of the world "Low Developed Countries." They also promoted more coordination between leading world economies, the development of alternative energies, and oil conservation policies. The tools for implementing these objectives were cooperation, multilateralism, and concerted decision-making within international organizations.[5]

The democratic candidate Jimmy Carter joined the Commission from its onset and during the 1976 presidential campaign there was an intense sharing of information, especially about foreign policy and economics between the election committee and many trilateralists. After his victory, the new president tried to implement the so-called "trilateralist approach" by promoting North-South relations, a regional approach in local conflicts, renewed economic and political cooperation between the allies, as new priorities in U. S. foreign policy. By 1979 the escalation of tension in superpower relations, the Iranian Islamic revolution, and the hostage crisis, forced Carter to re-establish a classic global containment approach, failing to regain the public consensus against the rise of neoconservatives.

By focusing on the close connection between Carter's foreign policy and the Trilateral Commission, my project hopes to provide a new and original approach to understanding the Carter administration. At the same time, I hope to evade the classic dilemma featured in most of the literature on the administration, which seem to rotate inevitably around the assessment of Carter as a "failed" president.

David Rockefeller and the Origins of the Trilateral Commission, 1971-1973

The proposal by David Rockefeller to create a NGO designed to discuss the new issues that emerged in the early 1970s arose not only from the writings of Brzezinski and others. The organization would represent a harsh criticism of the Nixon administration's foreign and economic policy, which aimed at a dangerous isolationism, contrary to the growing interdependence of the international system.

According to Fred C. Bergsten, of the Trilateral Commission: "In the summer of 1971, President Nixon and Secretary Connally revolutionized U.S. foreign economic policy. In so doing, they promoted a protectionist trend which raises questions about the future of the

U.S. economy … In so doing, they have also encouraged a disastrous isolationist trend which raises questions about the future of U.S. foreign policy."[6]

Rockefeller's commitment to strengthen relations with European and Japanese partners was also related to his business and financial activities, which benefited from the gradual opening of markets, and the intensification of capital investment and trade that affected the international system after the World War II.

More open markets that would go beyond the limits imposed by ideology was not only a simple business and financial strategy on Rockefeller's part, but a deep awareness of the changes which took place in the international system, especially in the Third World. He inspired the creation of several organizations in order to expand and preserve U.S. participation in foreign trade, as well as provide technical assistance to the private sector in the developing countries. Rockefeller considered the South the new and most important challenge in the advanced world, which had to invest in the modernization of the countries that had gained independence. Hence, the U.S. had to be the engine of a historic transition of the international system.[7]

The Nixon administration's unilateralism and isolationalism led Rockefeller to follow with great interest the cultural and political debate that was emerging from the crisis of Cold War liberalism. As Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations since 1970, he knew many scientists involved in the analysis of the transformations of the international system. Above all, the books and articles written by Brzezinski and Robert Bowie led him to think about a new form of cooperation between the major powers of world capitalism, in order to tackle the challenges of the future by a multilateral approach.

According to Rockefeller, world leaders were not able to provide the public with a broad vision with long-term goals for electoral reasons. Instead, an organization of private citizens and experts not connected with political power could not only help to define more

accurately a strategy to address the problems by placing them in a more general context, but also inform public opinion in order to build a consensus on new goals and strategies. The members of this group would come from the most advanced countries of the world capitalism, Japan, Western Europe and North America. The group had to include experts from different areas as, i.e., universities, the press, entrepreneurs, and the environmental movements.

The proposal acquired greater consistency during a meeting held in December 1971 at the Brookings Institution, where some experts debated on the agreements concluded by the Ten in Washington on the reform of the international monetary system. From the meeting, attended by economists and political scientists from Western Europe, Japan and the North America, including Bergsten and Cooper, emerged a negative opinion about the agreements. According to the report published by Brookings in January 1972, the world leaders showed to be unable to make concerted and multilateral decisions in order to tackle common problems, such as currency fluctuations, trade, and relations with the developing countries.[8]

In March 1972 Rockefeller gave four speeches in Chase Manhattan International Financial Forums held in Montreal, London, Brussels and Paris. Then in April, he attended the Bilderberg Group (BG) conference, held in Knokke, near Brussels, in order to convince its members to open the BG to Japan. However, despite the interest shown by the Bilderberg Group, the proposal was rejected because it was feared it would alter the Atlantic nature of the think tank. At this stage, Rockefeller decided to found a new organization on a trilateral basis, getting the support of Brzezinski, Henry Owen, and Robert Bowie.[9]

In the "Meeting on proposed Commission on Peace and Prosperity," the name temporarily attributed to the new forum, held on May 9, 1972, Rockefeller met some experts, subsequently included in the Planning Group of the Commission, joined, among others, by Owen, Brzezinski and Bowie, who were engaged in the general definition of the goals and

structure. That meeting was the first of a series which, between 1972 and 1973, led to the creation of the organization through intense brainstorming.

On May 9th 1972, the planning group organized a new meeting which was attended only by U.S. experts and academics. Rockefeller briefly presented his proposal, arguing that the new Commission had to deal primarily with economic issues, in particular the reform of the international monetary system and world trade. Brzezinski confirmed the importance of not giving a clear political orientation to the new organization, such as the Bilderberg Group.[10]

The second meeting was held in Pocantico Hills, New York, on the 23rd and 24th of July. It was the most important meeting in the planning stage of the Trilateral Commission. Among the topics included in the preparatory documents were: the relations between the three capitalist poles and the communist countries, trade and monetary issues, the relations between the developed world and developing countries, the global impact of world population growth, the renovation of international institutions for debating, and solving new global problems.

The agenda also dealt with structure and membership of the commission. It was necessary to introduce the possibility of electing one or more Chairmen. The election procedures, the official language, the duties of the executive committee, and the budget for meetings and research were dimissed. The creation of a Planning Group and committees for regional meetings in each of the three poles and the establishment of appropriate subcommittees to develop studies to be discussed later in the plenary meetings were proposed. The duration of the committee was proposed to be three years with the possibility of renewal.

The Pocantico meeting was the most important meeting between those planned by the promoters and was also attended by representatives from the other two poles, Japan and

Western Europe. In his introductory talk Rockefeller briefly retraced his recent commitment to the creation of a NGO, considered the issues presented in the speeches of March and April in Europe and supported the conclusions that the Commission's main objective was to collect the best minds in the world to address the problems of the future.[11]

At the final meeting of the Planning Group, held in Tokyo, between the 8th and 12th of January 1973 the Chairmen of the Commission were chosen, Takeshi Watanabe for Japan, Gerard C. Smith for North America, and Max Kohnstamm for Western Europe. During the meeting an Executive Committee was finally established that would meet two or three times a year, preferably after the meetings of the regional commissions. Brzezinski was confirmed as director of the Commission. Finally the first meetings between the Chairmen and the Director were scheduled in order to develop other themes to be proposed in the first meeting of the Executive Committee to be held in October.[12]

In March of 1973 the Planning Group drew up the final version of the Constitution of the Trilateral Commission. The document was divided in seven sections.[13]

The first section, entitled, "Name, Nature, Purposes and Structure," presented the main goals of the new organization, already enunciated at previous meetings of the Planning Group. The Commission was to be composed of about one hundred eighty members. Its key organs being the Executive Committee, the three regional Chairmen and the Director.

The second section defined the rights and duties of members and private citizens who could be invited by regional presidents to participate at the regional meetings or contribute to the preparation of a study, the Task Force report. In the third section members agreed that the Executive Committee, now composed of thirty-four experts, was the main political body of the Commission and after consultation with the regional Chairmen and the Director it had the right to choose the topics to be proposed and discussed.

The Executive Committee had to partecipate actively in the drafting of the report, work with the three commissioners chosen as authors, and promote final recommendations to be included in the conclusions of the Task Force report. Executive Committee members were chosen by the regional Chairmen and in case of cancellation or subsequent abandonment, would have required a new appointment by the regional Chairman, confirmed by the Executive Committee. This organ of the Commission was to meet at least once a year at the request of at least two of the three regional Chairmen.

The fourth and fifth sections described the role and the responsibilities of the regional Chairmen and the Director, who had to be elected by the Executive Committee respecting the principle of rotation among the three regions. They would have to devote much of their time to the activities of the organization. The Director was the chief operating officer of the Commission and managed the relationships between the Committee and individual members.

The sixth section was devoted to the Task Forces, which were selected by the Director and the Chairmen, who, along with the commissioners, contributed to the drafting of the studies during special regional meetings in order to involve the largest number of members. The last section listed various procedures regarding the possibility of amending the Constitution, the exclusive right of the Executive Committee, and of the publication of an annual report, *Trialogue*, which synthesized the work of the Commission in order to involve and inform public opinion and the media about its activities.[14]

The first Executive Committee of the Trilateral Commission was held on October 22-23, 1973 in Tokyo. The conclusions of the final declaration of the Executive Committee argued that:

> Growing interdependence is a fact of life of the contemporary world. It transcends and influences national systems. It requires new and more intensive forms of international cooperation to realize its benefits and to counteract economic and political nationalism. This interdependence, especially among Japan, Western Europe, and North America, generates new problems and frictions which endanger not only their well-being but affect adversely the other regions. Although the risks of nuclear

> confrontation have diminished, world peace and security are still to be given a lasting basis. New problems have also emerged to heighten the vulnerability of our planet. Humanity is faced with serious risks to the global environment. At the same time shortages in world resources could breed new rivalries, and widening disparities in mankind's economic condition are a threat to world stability and an affront to social justice. Finally bear a special responsibility for developing effective cooperation, both in their own interests and in those of the rest of the world.[15]

The phenomenon of globalization has its roots in the Seventies, and trilateralists understood better than others the profound changes in the international system, yet crystallized in the bipolar division. Until the twenty-first century, the disregard of the consequences and complexity of these changes is at the origin of the dysfunctions that characterize our present.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

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[3] Robert Bowie, *Shaping the Future: Foreign Policy in an Age of Transition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 1; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1970.
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[6] C. Fred Bergsten, "New Economics and U.S. Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs* (January 1972) 50: 2, pp. 199-222.

[7] David Rockefeller, *Memoirs*. New York: Random House, 2002.

[8] "Tripartite Report by Twelve Economists from North America, the European Community and Japan." January 1972, Trilateral Commission (North America) Collection (TCC), Pocantico Folder, Box 1, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

[9] David Rockefeller, *Memoirs*, New York: Random House, 2002; "Memorandum from David Rockefeller to Max Kohnstamm about proposed International Commission." 05/31/1972, TCC, Folder 3 , Box 1, RAC.

[10]"Minutes for May 9th, 1972 Meeting," 05/11/1972, TCC, Folder 2, Box 1, RAC; Letter from David Rockefeller to Mr. Nakayama, June 1972, TCC, Folder 8, Box 1, RAC.

[11] "Meeting on proposed Trilateral Commission." 07/24/1972, TCC, Folder 12, Box 1, RAC; David Rockefeller: "Comments on Proposed Commission." 05/23/72-06/01/1972, TCC, Folder 4, Box 1, RAC.

[12] "Meeting in Tokyo," 01/08/73-01/12/1973, TCC, Folder 21, Box 2, RAC.

[13] "Decisions Reached at Bruxelles Meetings of March 29th and 31st, 1973." 03/31/1973, TCC, Folder 25, Box 2, RAC.

[14] "Constitution of the Trilateral Commission," 03/05/1973, TCC, Folder 25, Box 2, RAC.

[15] *Trialogue*, "A Bullettin of North American—European—Japanese Affairs." November 1973, nn. 1-2. See: http://www.trilateral.org/