

## Artículo de investigación

## China as a factor in the evolution of “China-U.S.- (Soviet Union) Russian Strategic Triangle”

### China como factor en la evolución del "Triángulo Estratégico Ruso de China-EE. UU. (Unión Soviética)"

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The study objectives of this research work is to survey the China's diplomacy in the evolution of trilateral relations between China, the U.S. and Russia (the Soviet Union). The research methodology is based on a complex combination of scientific methods in a chronological order, mainly analytical, empirical, systematic, comparative, situational, narrative, and descriptive. The scientific novelty of this article is to provide the general observation of the key period of the historical evolution process of the existing strategic triangle in a large-scale timeline, meanwhile reveal the significant connection between domestic politics of single factor and trilateral relations within this triangle. The obtained conclusions can be applied in managing more stable and positive trilateral relations in complexity of international relations and contemporary global politics, by defining the features of the modern strategic triangle and each countries' role inside, indicating rising China's new role and foreign policy direction in a new era.

**Key Words:** China's Diplomacy; Domestic politics and Diplomacy; Russia; Strategic Triangle; Trilateral Relations; The United States

**Resumen**

Los objetivos del estudio de este trabajo de investigación es estudiar la diplomacia de China en la evolución de las relaciones trilaterales entre China, Estados Unidos y Rusia (la ex Unión Soviética). La metodología de investigación se basa en una combinación compleja de métodos científicos en un orden cronológico, principalmente analítico, empírico, sistemático, comparativo, situacional, narrativo y descriptivo. La novedad científica de este artículo es proporcionar la observación general del período clave del proceso de evolución histórica del triángulo estratégico existente en una línea de tiempo a gran escala, mientras tanto revela la conexión significativa entre la política interna de factor único y las relaciones trilaterales dentro de este triángulo. Las conclusiones obtenidas se pueden aplicar en la gestión de relaciones trilaterales más estables y positivas en la complejidad de las relaciones internacionales y la política global contemporánea, definiendo las características del triángulo estratégico moderno y el papel de cada país en el interior, lo que indica el aumento del nuevo papel de China y la dirección de la política exterior en una nueva era.

**Palabras clave:** Diplomacia de China; Política nacional y diplomacia; Rusia; Triángulo estratégico; Relaciones trilaterales; Los Estados Unidos.

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## Introduction

Domestic politics and diplomacy are two factors of great relevance in the contemporary political science. China's foreign policy is also mainly influenced by its domestic political factors. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States in 1979, China's diplomatic strategy can be divided into five stages under the framework of the Sino-US-(Soviet Union) Russian strategic triangle. Today, this big game beyond the strategic triangle continues, the change of each player's role and status in the triangle would cause the dramatic change of the bilateral and trilateral relations. As China's rise becomes a new pattern globally. Due to the complexity and the diversity of domestic interests, China's diplomacy will definitely be more competitive and pragmatic in order to strive to maximize national interests. The subject matter of the study is trilateral relations evolution process, dedicated to 40 years anniversary of establishment of Sino-U.S. relations beyond a new world order. The research goal has determined the following objectives: 1) to observe the evolution of trilateral relations and changes in the strategic triangle; 2) to reveal how domestic politics could affect each factor's foreign policy during certain period; 3) to analyze the features of the strategic triangle; 4) to demonstrate China's diplomacy direction with the triangle in a long run.

## Theoretical Framework

There had been some debates about the emergence time of the strategic triangle [Gottlieb, 1977; Liebethal, 1979; Hyland, 1981; Kim, 1987], while scholars and historians tend to apply the concept of a strategic triangle of trilateral relations in post-Cold War era [Dittmer, 2004; Kotkin, 2009]. Dittmer and Kotkin have presented the most recent evaluation of the strategic triangle among the United States, Russia, and China. Opining upon the reset in relations between Moscow and Washington, Kotkin argues that "China will retain the upper hand, not only in its bilateral relationship with Russia but also in the strategic triangle comprising China, Russia, and the United States" [Kotkin, 2009].

The China factor in U.S. foreign policy in accordance with H. Kissinger's China card thus played an important role in calculations about how to manage the United States' adversary relationship with the Soviet Union during the 1970s [Talbot, 1981]. China, was seeking to pursue normalization with the United States in

order to counterweight the Soviet Union [Galenovich, 2001].

James N. Rosenau first proposed the study of foreign policy decisions from the interaction between international and domestic levels. He proposed the concept of international and domestic linkage politics [Rosenau, 1969,1973]. After the Cold War, international political research has shifted from a traditional single system level to a combination of domestic and international levels. As Robert Keohane stated, "The connection between domestic politics and international relations and the diversity of international systems are undoubtedly the most important frontier topics in contemporary world political research" [Keohane, 2005].

One of the important manifestations of studying international relations from the perspective of domestic politics is that the word "domestic" has frequently appeared in various international relations professional papers and research works. Assuming the state as a unitary actor and the analogy of "billiards" to the state are gradually coming to an end, Western scholars have searched for the source of international relations affairs from the domestic level. Some scholars have analyzed how the characteristics of the domestic political system could affect international negotiations [Evans, Jacobson, Putnam, 1993]. Other scholars have studied how different consequences of domestic political operations lead to differences in the participation, compliance and the countries' choice in international mechanisms and norms [Cortell, Davis, 1996; Checkel, 1997]. Some scholars have observed how the shortcomings of domestic politics have led to crises, conflicts and even wars [Lamare, 1991].

Among them, the "Double Edged Diplomacy", which is based on the "double-layered game" analysis, has become the most compelling theory for comprehensive research that examines the interaction between domestic and international forces, connects international relations and comparative politics outcome [Evans, Jacobson, Putnam, 1993].

According to Robert D. Putnam, many international negotiations can be compared to two-level games: at the international level, governments are striving to maximize profits and minimize losses for its nation; at the domestic level, interest groups make pressure on policymakers to adopt policies that are in their

favor, the government needs the support of these interest groups to ensure governance. Each country's leadership face two chessboards: where foreign negotiating opponents sitting on the international negotiating table; and representatives of all parties' interests sitting around the domestic negotiating table [Putnam, 1988].

H. Milner also made a comparatively comprehensive basic review of the research on the relationship between international relations and comparative politics [Milner, 1998].

### **Methodology**

The methodological basis consists of the general scientific methods of political analysis of international relations, in particular analytical, empirical, chronological, comparative, situational, narrative, and descriptive methods, which are based on the principles of consistency and historicity. Furthermore, research methods are based on the principles of systematic and structural-functional analysis, which provides the comprehensive review of trilateral relations evolution generally.

### **Results and discussion**

During the Cold War, the Sino-U.S.-Soviet strategic triangle could be called a triangle, that means, changes in the external strategy of one corner affect the comparison of power between the other two corners. Changes in the relationship on one side affect the relationship between the other two sides. The strategic triangle's triple corners had checks and balances, however this characteristic did not exist in the trilateral relations between China, Russia, and the United States in the post Cold War era, the China-U.S.-Soviet strategic triangle affected the entire world, while the impact of modern China-U.S.-Russia trilateral relations is not completely global, mainly in Asia and Europe. This great-power triangle became a focal point of Washington efforts to sustain an advantageous position in relations with Beijing and Moscow. Thus the trilateral relationship is asymmetrical.

Sino-U.S. relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations (1979-present) can be roughly divided into five stages from the perspective of levels of domestic politics and diplomacy.

The first stage (1979 ~ 1989): China-U.S. security "quasi-alliance" with the Soviet Union as their common rival without economic ties.

Though U.S. President R. Nixon visited China in 1972 towards a Sino-American rapprochement, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two giants was delayed until 1979. There are complicated reasons of factors of domestic politics. During this period, the Soviet communist offensive became biggest threat for US global strategy, both politically and militarily. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1978 was a landmark event, which led the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States as the geopolitical reaction. The sudden development was inseparable from the development of the international situation and the strategic thinking of Chinese and American decision-makers [Jain, 2010]. On the one hand, due to the turmoil in Vietnam War and its various domestic problems in the United States, including the anti-war movement, African American movement, women's movement and youth movement, the decline of the hegemony status of the dollar, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the impact of the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis and so on. The Soviet-U.S. power comparison is undergoing changes that are not conducive to the United States; on the other hand, the United States decision makers as Republican President R. Reagan targeted the Soviet Union as its main rival, realized the differences and contradictions between China and the Soviet Union, sees subtle changes within China, and intended to guide changes within China and shape China's future [Kim, 1987]. In general, among the US domestic factors, the executive branch pursued policies to broaden and deepen ties with China and which were supported by centrist Senators and Representatives, which had not yet been overwhelmed by the partisanship of the next decade. Although public interest and attention were not high, the American people were basically on board as well.

During the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of CCP, the focus of work shifted to economic construction. Reform and opening up urgently require a peaceful and stable surrounding international political environment. At this time, Sino-Soviet relations have been in full swing. The Soviet Union became China's major security threat. Due to the initial economic reforms achievement and the rising oil prices, Soviet foreign policy was offensive while and the United States diplomacy was defensive. The United States and China "quasi-aligned" to form a strategic alliance against the Soviet Union. China's modernization requires scientific training and support of advanced technology and management experience from the Western

countries, thus the most urgent task of China's diplomacy is to improve Sino-U.S. relations. The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States not only means the opening up of China's diplomacy, but also basically coincides with China's domestic reforms, both factors has great relevance [Dittmer, 1981]. China and the United States jointly supported Afghanistan's resistance to the Soviet military intervention. However, the Taiwan dilemma cannot be completely resolved. In general, there is almost no economic and trade exchange between China and the United States also with no common ideological basis. The Soviet factor played a decisive role in Sino-U.S. rapprochement.

The second stage (1989 ~ 1991): the Sino-U.S. Relations crisis with the absence of the common rival in the end period of the Cold War.

Witnessing the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the Gorbachev reforms of the Soviet Union, the United States supported these reforms and promoted the domestic changes of the Soviet Union in a direction that beneficial to the U.S. strategic interests. Under the combined effect of the international macroclimate and the domestic microclimate, political storms had occurred in China, which has severely affected China's reform and opening-up process that has lasted for a decade. The serious political turmoil in China changed the decision-making environment in the United States, which led the dramatic change the US impression of China overnight. Various forces and interest groups in the United States, including the Senate and House of representatives, human rights organizations, arms control activists, environmental protection organizations and trade unions had become more active than ever before, which had effectively increased their role in U.S. policy-making process towards China and politicized the US China policy [Suettinger, 2003]. The United States imposed sanctions against China due to the Tiananmen incidents. Sino-U.S. relations have deteriorated rapidly, China's role and importance for the United States to jointly resist the Soviet Union has rapidly declined. Shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China's strategic value for U.S. against the Soviet Union quickly disappeared. The role of domestic factors in US China policy-making has increased. Some American politicians believed that the United States has no desire for China, while China has sought for the United States, it's the U.S. turn for putting pressure on China. To be realistic, the dissolution of the Soviet Union may not be China's subjective desire, but from a geopolitical

point of view, China is not an insignificant role in the process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this period, the Soviet factors gradually weakened and finally disappeared in the development of the Sino-U.S. relations. China was forced to seek new diplomatic strategies and make new large-scale strategic adjustments in a new world order.

The third stage (1991 ~ 2001): China-Russia "quasi-quasi-alliance" with insufficient economic foundation.

During this period, the strength of the United States reached its peak. The U.S. promotes the values of "democracy" in diplomacy and adopts unilateralist and force policies. The United States was still in the most active and favorable strategic position in this strategic triangle.

On Sino-U.S. relations, Security issues stood out while economic and trade relations developed effectively as the Clinton administration granted China MFN status, the US commercial community who supported Clinton during the election demanded to maximize the access into a huge Chinese market, Democratic President B. Clinton had to keep his campaign slogan of recovering the economy to favor their voters. Meanwhile, major tough issues such as human rights, Dalai Lama and Taiwan became on the table as the US human rights community and pro-tibetian and Taiwan lobby group in the Congress were deeply divided over proper approach. The Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, the NATO air strike on the Chinese Embassy in 1999 and a collision between Chinese and American aircraft in the South China Sea occurred in early 2001 had been viewed as the new pattern of Sino-U.S. relations in a new period.

On U.S.-Russia relations, the United States was keen to transform the new Russia while Russia pursues "one-sided" pro-western diplomacy under President B. Yeltsin. The U.S.-Russian relations had entered a "honeymoon period". However, the United States has implemented a strategy of harmlessness, incompetence, and inaction toward Russia. Russia's original eager hope turned into deep disappointment as collapsing economy due to President B. Yeltsin's national privatization and shock therapy economic reform, which had led to the Russian Default in 1998. U.S.-Russian relations started to fray as Moscow strongly opposed the NATO eastward expansion and U.S.-led NATO military operation in Kosovo in 1999.

As the de facto U.S.–China alliance ended, a China–Russian rapprochement began, which reflects the significance of this strategic triangle. Similar international situations, common international pressures, and similar national missions (transitions) have pushed China and Russia closer to each other, forming a "quasi-quasi-alliance" and unilateralism over the United States. The two countries' bilateral relations have been distinguished by vigorous attempts on both sides to maintain a positive general atmosphere while keeping the aims of these ties clothed in strategic ambiguity. In 1992, the two countries declared a "constructive partnership". In 1996, China and Russia formed a strategic cooperative partnership. Both sides have taken advantage to balance the United States powers in variety of regional and international affairs, forming a new type of "quasi-quasi alliance". Although the United States was wary of the approach of China and Russia, U.S. decision makers still believed that even the united force of China and Russia could not match the U.S. strength and balance the advantages of American unipolar dominance [Ikenberry, 2002].

The fourth stage (2001 ~ 2014): China's parallel development of bilateral relations with both Russia and the United States, implementing a "double-line cooperation" strategy.

Utilizing the opportunity of the U.S. war on terror after September 11, fundamental changes have taken place in the U.S. foreign strategy. China's internal and external strategies, centralized on economic construction and creating a favorable international environment, had not changed at all. The U.S. domestic factors including the Congress and the senate, putting counter-terrorism as nation's priority, the two terms of the Bush presidency would probably be remembered as a period in which a vicious political divide continued from the previous decade and largely determined the political culture. Sino-US relations had a relatively stable development during George W. Bush era, despite the Taiwan independence movement and the Tibet riots in 2008. The basic issues of China-U.S. cooperation is much broader than ever before. Regarding the "China Model" and the "Beijing Consensus", China and the United States have focused the termination such that "responsible stakeholder", "joining the same boat" [Turin, 2010]. Many contradictions between China and the United States during this period were also very acute, manifested in the fields of human rights, trade, Tibet, Xinjiang, China's growing military power, and climate change. On the Taiwan issue, both China and the

United States "seek stability and avoid chaos", which made the Taiwan issue temporarily being retreated from the core issue in Sino-US relations. Republican President George W. Bush's neo-conservatism ended with a "stable and constructive Sino-US relations" as his political legacy. Under the impact of the global financial crisis, the U.S. domestic politics urgently required China's engagement and cooperation to recovery, the United States officials even proposed the G2 theory. Democratic President B. Obama affirmed that US-China relations as the most important bilateral relations when he took the office. A strategic and economic dialogue mechanism had been established in 2009. In an effort to build a "new model" of the major power relations, President Obama and Xi's meeting in 2013 had been considered as the most important meeting between both sides in 4 decades.

In terms of relations with Russia, Sino-Russian strategic cooperative relations are becoming more and more institutionalized. Bilateral relations continued to move forward, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, which functioned as a vital platform in which China and Russia could engage multilaterally in Central Asia. A further bilateral milestone was the final settlement of the border dispute in 2004. Underdeveloped economic ties also began to show signs of improvement as bilateral trade increased. By 2007, bilateral trade had reached close to 50 billion USD. Energy cooperation was an essential element of the trade basket such as The ESPO pipeline, which became operational in 2011, not only benefited China, but also played as Russia's main geo-economic tool for gaining increased influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Bilateral security ties also developed in which the arms trade constituted an import element, Russian arms sales played a key role in China's military modernization. The two countries have expanded and added substance to their annual military exercises since 2005.

Since 2012, as the U.S. economy had been recovered gradually, the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy sent a clear message of strategic shift from the Middle-east to the Asia-Pacific, beginning a rebalancing process to corral the Asian countries into the US anti-rising China crusade. Sino-U.S. relations became more complicated than ever before, many tough issues as South China sea disputes, Taiwan, TPP, US military encirclement against China. Meanwhile the U.S. accelerated its containment steps in the Eastern Europe to bloc Russia, by using colorful

reforms in Ukraine and Georgia to contain Russia politically and missile deployment to encircle Russia militarily. U.S.-Russia relations became further strained after the Russia-Georgian War in 2008, the Maidan movement in Kiev in 2014 turned the situation into chaos in Ukraine, led into a regional crisis which made the U.S.-Russia relations greatly deteriorated.

The fifth stage (2014 to the present time): Sino-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era as the United States being the common rival.

The Ukraine Crisis is a core turning-point in China-U.S.-Russia relations. While Russia-U.S. relations backwarded to a new Cold War level, China was now more than ever considered the most reliable strategic partner for Russia against Western sanctions and as a source of boosting the domestic economy. The more strained geopolitical environment facing China and Russia, underpinned by the sharp improvement in ties since the end of the Cold War. New era of Sino-Russian ties were manifest in greater regional and international coordination, trade and economics and military cooperation.

Politically, Chinese President Xi Jinping has visited Moscow more than any other capital city since he took the office. President Xi also praised that Sino-Russian relations as a model of relations between major powers today. Economically, Russia's economic and financial reliance on China grew substantially, more and more Russian companies are seeking the Chinese manufactures as alternatives for their former US or European partners. Today China is Russia's top trading partner. Bilateral trade exceeded \$100 billion in 2018. Both sides are working towards bilateral trade in their own currencies and get rid of the dollars' impact. Both sides are working closely towards China's grand strategy of "One Belt, One Road" (BRI). Militarily, the two countries conducted a joint navy exercise in the Baltic Sea for the first time in 2017. China participated in Russia's annual Vostok military exercise for the first time in 2018. Russia has also sold China advanced military equipment, including an S-400 air defense system and 24 SU-35 fighter jets for the first time.

Due to President Trump's "America First" conservative policies, the U.S. approach to China has grown more adversarial on multiple geopolitical and economic fronts, the bilateral relations deteriorated sharply since 2017, as the Trump administration's trade war against China

since 2018 and the tough political stance on certain issues such like the South China sea, Huawei ban, restrictions against Chinese and the 2019 Hong Kong Act sent the signal of the dramatic change of the U.S. policy towards China, which lasted for over 4 decades.

The rise of a more politically and militarily assertive Russia and an economically and institutionally ascendant China may be characterized as the two principal forces challenging the United States in global policymaking. While the Sino-U.S. relations are facing a crisis as positive forces, interests, and beliefs that sustained bilateral ties are giving way to undue pessimism, hostility, and a zero-sum mindset in variety area of engagement, the new era of Sino-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership was related to a vision of a quite significant change in the basic balance of power in the world.

### Conclusion

In general, in modern China-Russia-U.S. Trilateral relations, the nature of China's foreign policy requires to develop its relations with Russia and the United States in the same scale, and to implement a "double-line" cooperation strategy. This is defined directly by complexity of China's domestic politics as China is still a developing country with large population, China's interests are diverse rather than singular. Thus it needs to create a favorable environment for its domestic development for perpetual competition in the long-run to strive its national interest. China cooperates with Russia on military, political and energy sector; meanwhile cooperation with the United States economically, financially and culturally, all of this bilateral cooperation is partial. Specifically, they could make checks and balances with each other.

The trilateral relations have a non-zero sum nature. China and Russia have different expectations for the three sides. Neither country could accept a better bilateral relations between the other two countries. China is not willing to see a significant U.S.-Russian relations, which would make China as a target, so does Russia. Yet neither side has any intention of anti-US coalition establishment. American scholars have many discussions of U.S. policy towards China and Russia [Brzezinski, 1998; Katzenstein, 2005], many of them doubt about the possibility of a new anti-American alliance between China and Russia [Rozman, 2014]. In practice, the United States has more "hard power deterrence" against Russia and more "soft power containment"

against China. The author believes that how close China and Russia could get close to each other depend on a great extent on US foreign policy and domestic politics. As the U.S.'s always played a more active role besides two other players in this triangle.

Comparing with the Soviet Union's role, Russia today has changed from one of the protagonists to a balancer. Its role in balancing Sino-U.S. relations is not as strong as before. If the decisive factor in the strategic triangle during the Cold War is the Soviet Union, the decisive factor in the trilateral relations after the Cold War is obviously the United States. The non-zero sum game in the three sides is more colorful. If there is no possibility of the U.S.-Soviet alliance to deal with China during the Cold War, the possibility of the joint forces between the United States and Russia against China exists theoretically.

As the Trump administration's intention to change the curve of the contemporary Sino-U.S. relations development which had been lasted for 4 decades, rising China's national identity has been targeted by Americans as the major threat. Beijing is still deemed manageable and had no intention to antagonize Washington. However the future of the Sino-U.S. relations became more fragile and unpredictable. Meanwhile, the Trump administration were intended to bent on returning to a "reset" with Russia in order to contain China, but finally failed, domestic force including the democratic party and American public strongly opposed the President's move amid the controversial election and finally led to a investigation of the Russian meddling of the 2016 presidential election [Huang, 2017].

Historical evidence reveals that the Sino-Russian and Sino-U.S. relations always be better than the U.S.-Soviet (Russian) relations since 1979, theoretically U.S. always gained a most active and favorable position among this trilateral relations. Under certain conditions, Russia may play the "China card" to the United States meanwhile playing the "U.S. card" to China in order to seek the balance of power [Kremenyuk, 2012]. Russian scholars believe that Russia is the weakest player in trilateral relations and could play a flexible role similar to China's right and left in the strategic triangle period. Russia is also worried that Sino-U.S. "inside operations" would threaten Russia's interests [Davydov, 2015]. Russia reacts very sensitively to the former US G2 plan. Therefore, today's China-Russia-U.S. trilateral relations have some imbalance and instability. Although the size and degree of

Russia's role has changed in different periods, it has not withdrawn from the game.

As Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy argues that the U.S. domestic politics are able to impact foreign policy much more directly today than was during the Cold War. U.S. policy toward China is particularly susceptible to this influence because the rise of China is the major issue on the U.S. policy establishment, an absolutely bipartisan issue, while behind that agreement lie widely divergent interests [Roy, 2015].

The basis for cooperation between China and the United States is becoming broader. The rising China wants less from the United States. On the contrary, the United States wants gain more from China. Throughout the past 40 years of US policy toward China, each of the presidency had toughened China at the beginning and turned to be friendly with China at the end of the term. This is mainly influenced by U.S. domestic politics. In modern Sino-U.S. relations, the role of China's domestic political factors is getting more proactive, indicating China's independent diplomacy is becoming more mature, and China's comprehensive national strength, global status and influence are improving. In China's global vision, it is not only the world that influences China. On the contrary, China's reaction and influence on the international structure and global system are becoming increasingly apparent. The problem now is not only that China must adapt to international rules, but also how the world should consider how to adapt to China's rise as a new pattern, by advocating China's model from multipolarity to multilateralism, from peaceful rise to peaceful development, from establishing a new international order to building a harmonious world. The concept of geopolitics in diplomatic ideas is getting weaker while national interests, especially pragmatic economic interests, have risen. Ideological and social institutional factors are becoming less important in modern Chinese diplomacy. The development of a de facto alliance between Russia and China, driven by their increasing anti-U.S. containment alignment, could mark the return of the "old-fashioned" great power alliances between equals.

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