

The Dynamics of Status Quo and Rising Powers: The China-Russia-United States Triangular Relationship

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Abstract

This article explores the contradictions between status quo powers (such as the United States) and rising powers (such as China and Russia) and the characteristics and future trends of the China-Russia-United States triangular relationship. The article emphasizes the impact of relative changes in national power on these relationships. Since the early 21st century, China's rise has narrowed the gap in comprehensive national power between China and the United States. The United States seeks to maintain its superpower status but faces declining power and international challenges. The U.S. adopted a policy of both containment and cooperation with China and Russia, with cooperation continuing in some critical issues. Additionally, the article explores the foreign policy strategies of various countries, including China's Belt and Road Initiative and the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, and their impact on the global strategic landscape.

Keywords: Geopolitical Relations; Superpower Dynamics; China-Russia-USA Triad; Global Strategic Trends

1. Current State and Characteristics of the Trilateral Relationship Between China, Russia, and the United States

After the Cold War, the trilateral relationship between China, Russia, and the United States has exhibited a relatively stable trend. With China's rise, the regional power balance has been disrupted, leading to changes in the trilateral dynamics between China, the United States, and Russia (Malyarenko, 2021) (Zhao et al., 2022) (The Modern China-Russia-US Triangle – The Diplomat, n.d.). The current state of the tripartite relationship can be characterized as follows: China and Russia share a close relationship, partly due to external factors like countering US hegemony and partly due to their own social and economic development needs. The U.S.-Russia relationship has deteriorated, becoming a new norm of confrontation. The China-U.S. relationship has undergone significant adjustments, with the previously foundational economic and trade ties becoming the most significant variable. However, due to the immense market capacities of both nations, the trilateral relationship maintains a relatively stable dimension.

Sino-Russian Relations: An Exemplar of a New Type of Major Power Relationship Based on Equality, Mutual Trust, and Win-Win Cooperation**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China and Russia have overcome various challenges to establish close cooperation across political, economic, cultural, and international domains, serving as an example of central power relations. First, Sino-Russian bilateral relations emphasize political trust and strategic cooperation. In recent years, Chinese leaders and President Putin have met 22 times, and Chinese leaders have visited Russia on six state occasions. These frequent high-level interactions reflect the unique nature of their relationship, the deep friendship between their leaders, and robust political trust. The further development of the China-Russia strategic partnership enhances the strategic reliance of both nations on each other for revitalization and security (Songsermsawas, 2010).

Second, both nations have deepened practical cooperation in various sectors and promoted regional integration, focusing on building a Eurasian economic partnership. After signing the "Joint Statement on Cooperation in the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the

Eurasian Economic Union" in May 2015, the national development strategies of both countries have accelerated integration(Bhowmik et al., 2021)(Abajyan, 2021). Substantial progress in practical cooperation between China and Russia has been secured through various mechanisms. China has remained Russia's top trading partner for eight consecutive years. Both countries have deepened cooperation in energy, military technology, agriculture, finance, and other fields. In May 2018, China and the Eurasian Economic Union signed an economic and trade cooperation agreement, marking the transition from project-driven cooperation to institution-led cooperation. China's new journey towards a more open, higher-level economy, as outlined in the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, will offer new and more significant opportunities for China-Russia economic and trade cooperation while advancing Eurasian economic partnership.

Additionally, both countries have strengthened strategic cooperation in the international arena to safeguard the world order jointly. China and Russia have similar or closely aligned positions on almost all major international and regional issues, making each other the primary partners and necessary strategic support in international affairs. This cooperation is conducive to shaping a fairer and more just international economic and political order.

Finally, continued enhancement of people-to-people exchanges and joint implementation of the "China-Russia Action Plan for Humanitarian Cooperation" have increased friendship and solid social and public support for China-Russia relations. Both countries have successfully hosted the "Year of China," "Year of Language," "Year of Tourism," "Year of Youth Friendly Exchange," and "Year of Media Exchange," among other activities, yielding significant results. China and Russia have become among the most friendly nations in the eyes of each other's people(Chu et al., 2022)(Cui, 2022)(Stefano et al., 2021). The annual flow of people between China and Russia exceeds 3 million, with over 80,000 students and exchange participants sent between them each year. Through various cultural exchanges and cooperation, both countries have deepened collaboration in various fields, injecting strong momentum into the comprehensive strategic partnership's continuous, stable, and healthy development.

U.S.-Russia Relations: A Prolonged State of Competition and Confrontation

U.S.-Russia relations have experienced fluctuations since Russia's independence, with the United States increasingly viewing Russia as a competitor and attempting to contain its influence. The eruption of the Ukraine crisis has led to continued antagonism in U.S.-Russia relations, which may become a long-term pattern. After taking office, President Trump could not fulfill his desire to improve U.S.-Russia relations, instead escalating economic sanctions against Russia, mainly due to domestic political pressures. Hopes for improving Russia-U.S. relations within Russia have gradually faded, as strategic contradictions between the two countries on issues such as Syria, NATO, and the Ukraine crisis remain unresolved. The competition and confrontation between the US and Russia have intensified, with far-reaching consequences for the structural balance of the trilateral relationship and profound effects on international strategic stability.

First, U.S.-Russia political relations are trapped in a Cold War mindset. After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the United States imposed severe economic sanctions on Russia, resulting in a sharp deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations. The Trump administration has demonstrated a robust Cold War mentality in its approach to Russia. The "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" was introduced on July 28, 2017, leading to comprehensive economic sanctions on Russia and a peak in the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations. In March 2018, the "Skripal poisoning case" in the UK escalated rapidly, evolving from a single case to rallying Western anti-Russia sentiment. More than 20 Western countries successively expelled over 700 Russian diplomats, marking the largest expulsion of foreign diplomats since the end of the Cold War. Although President Trump and President Putin held an official summit in Helsinki on July 16, 2018, it was highly symbolic but lacked substantive significance. The antagonism in U.S.-Russia relations has become a significant obstacle to improving relations, exacerbated by the ongoing "RussiaGate" investigation.

Second, U.S.-Russia economic and trade relations are a political-relations barometer. From the "Jackson-Vanik Amendment" during the U.S.-Soviet rivalry to subsequent economic sanctions and counter-sanctions, U.S.-Russia trade relations have been consistently disrupted by political issues. After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the United States imposed harsh

economic sanctions on Russia, and Russia retaliated with counter-sanctions. In 2014, U.S.-Russia trade volume was \$29.2 billion, falling to under \$20.9 billion in 2015, a 30% decrease from 2014. 2016, it reached \$20.3 billion, a 3.18% drop from 2015.

Additionally, the Trump administration's emphasis on developing traditional energy resources has led to the United States surpassing Russia as the world's largest natural gas producer. Russia's energy companies primarily target the European market and are now direct competitors with the United States. Current disputes are no longer limited to pricing but involve efforts to replace Russian energy exports through sanctions. This is evident in the US sanctions on the "Nord Stream 2" natural gas pipeline project and opposition to German-Russian energy cooperation. This weak economic and trade relationship and intense competition in the energy sector cannot serve as a stable foundation for political relations.

Finally, competition and confrontation have intensified in the realm of strategic balance. The United States and Russia are the two nations that influence global strategic stability and security. Although there is a significant disparity in their comprehensive capabilities, only Russia possesses the capability to deter the United States militarily. Since President Trump took office, there has been an increase in military deployments and upgrades in the United States, with reductions in funding for all federal government agencies except the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. 2019 US defense spending reached \$716 billion, a 3% increase from 2018. Under the pretext of Russia's role in its military doctrine, the United States has intensified the upgrading of its nuclear arsenal. In August 2018, President Trump signed the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019," substantially increasing investments in missile defense, the renewal of offensive nuclear forces, the development of new shipborne missiles, artificial intelligence (AI) weapon systems, the construction of a new generation of naval vessels, and the development of hypersonic aircraft. Additionally, Vice President Pence announced the establishment of the "Space Force" in the Pentagon in 2020, emphasizing the need for the United States to maintain a military presence in space and pursue dominance in space military capabilities. This move may trigger an unprecedented global arms race and potentially have severe consequences for strategic stability.

Despite Russia's defense budget being significantly lower than the United States, it has

demonstrated a resolute military posture. In March 2018, President Putin dedicated two-thirds of his state-of-the-nation address to showcase Russia's latest strategic weapons, including 80 new intercontinental ballistic missiles, 102 submarine-launched missiles, and three "Peresvet" strategic nuclear submarines. Additionally, Russia has adopted military strategies and tactics that approach the US homeland, leading to US and NATO air drills over Eastern Europe, warships in the Black Sea, and the dispatch of Tu-160 strategic bombers near the US East Coast for training purposes. Russia has also accelerated the production of the S-500 (Prometheus) missile defense system. Russia and the United States have intensified their arms race and confrontation from offensive to defensive. This situation could lead to a monumental global arms race and severely threaten global strategic stability.

Parallel Competition and Cooperation in Sino-U.S. Relations

Sino-U.S. relations are undoubtedly the most complex, comprehensive, and strategically significant bilateral relationship today. The dynamic of competition and cooperation between China and the United States has become the cornerstone of the existing Asia-Pacific order. With the initiation of the Sino-U.S. trade war, the United States is crafting policies and strategies that consider China as its most significant strategic adversary. The United States, as the largest developed country in the world, and China, as the largest developing country, reached a turning point in 2010 when China became the world's second-largest economy in terms of total economic output. The United States views China's rapid rise with hostility, perceiving it as a threat to U.S. interests.

In 2011, President Obama's pivot to Asia policy designated China as the most substantial challenger to its global leadership. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense released the "Quadrennial Defense Review," emphasizing that "U.S. national interests are closely tied to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. The Department of Defense will continue implementing the President's rebalance toward this key region." After President Trump took office, "America First" trade protectionism was prominent, blurring the lines between the previously established positive and negative factors in Sino-U.S. relations, although both coexist.

Former positive factors included the close economic ties and extensive economic cooperation between China and the United States. In 2017, the Sino-U.S. trade volume reached \$635.97 billion. As of June 2018, China was the United States' second-largest trading partner, the third-largest export market, and the largest source of imports. China was the destination for 26% of Boeing airplanes, 56% of soybeans, 16% of automobiles, and 15% of integrated circuits exported by the United States. China was also one of the largest holders of U.S. government debt, with \$1.05 trillion in U.S. Treasury bonds as of January 2017. Nevertheless, the Trump administration continued initiating the trade war, which harmed China and the United States and jeopardized the global economic outlook.

One of the negative factors is the complex and convoluted political relationship between the two countries. Behind the trade war lies a dispute over development models. After taking office, President Trump prioritized maintaining U.S. global hegemony in foreign policy. The main challenge in Sino-U.S. relations is that the United States views China through a Cold War lens, causing anxiety among elites. The Obama-era "Pivot to Asia" strategy and Trump's "Indo-Pacific" strategy have both aimed to strengthen U.S. alliances, intervene in South China Sea disputes, and contain China.

There is also uncertainty in Sino-U.S. strategic security interests—first, the U.S. missile defense system deployment in Asia. The United States has already established two missile defense systems in Japan and has similar deployments in the Taiwan Strait. In April 2017, due to tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the United States decided to deploy the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, effectively surrounding China from three sides. Simultaneously, Japan is exploring deploying the Aegis Ashore missile defense system and the latest version of the THAAD missile system, which has higher interception capabilities than the Patriot-3. The deployment of missile defense systems in Asia is a matter of global strategic balance, which inevitably undermines the security and stability of China in the region and damages mutual trust between China, the United States, and regional countries.

Second, the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea. President Trump spoke to Tsai Ing-wen shortly after taking office, attempting to undermine the principles agreed upon in Sino-U.S. relations regarding Taiwan. In March 2018, Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act,

elevating the level of interaction between the U.S. and Taiwan and increasing the so-called "security commitments" to Taiwan. Furthermore, it suggested that U.S. naval vessels and Marines should "return to Taiwan." Concerning the South China Sea issue, the U.S. has not only criticized the "militarization" of island reclamation but has also directly framed China's legitimate and rational actions in the South China Sea as a "threat and coercion against other claimants in the South China Sea" and that China wants to establish "military control" over the entire South China Sea.

Basic Characteristics of the Sino-Russian-U.S. Triangular Relationship

Given China and Russia's commitment to their national rejuvenation strategies and the United States' persistent efforts to maintain and solidify its global hegemonic status, U.S. pressure on China and Russia will likely remain the same. For quite some time, China and Russia will continue to face U.S. containment and hegemony. Compared to the Cold War era's triangular relationship between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States when China's power was relatively weak, the current Sino-Russian-U.S. relationship exhibits a more complex triangular pattern.

Characteristics include:

1. Each corner of the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangle has witnessed significant changes in its capabilities. While the relative power of the United States has declined since the end of the Cold War, Russia's economic scale has diminished, even though it has retained its significant natural resources and military strength. On the other hand, China has significantly increased its comprehensive national strength, becoming the world's second-largest economy in terms of total GDP. While it lags behind the U.S. and Russia in military power, China's position has strengthened significantly within the triangular relationship.
2. The rivalry between Russia and the United States has intensified, significantly influencing the trajectory of the triangular relationship. Both China and Russia emphasize their voice and the legitimacy of rules in international relations, leading to a pattern of competition and

cooperation with the United States. The trend of regional integration in the Eurasian region by major powers has created a situation of complex power balancing and regulation disputes, a contest over rules among the three parties.

2. Main Factors Affecting the Development of the Sino-Russian-U.S. Triangular Relationship

The evolution and development of excellent power relations are based on changes in the world's strategic landscape and assessments of national strategic interests. Similarly, the evolution of the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship is not an exception. Conversely, changes in excellent power relations have essential implications for the global strategic landscape and the international situation.

Changes in the International Order Trigger Adjustments and Interactions in the Sino-Russian-U.S. Triangular Relationship

The international order has undergone several stages of change, and the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship has experienced fluctuations accordingly. The post-World War II bipolar structure was considered a relatively orderly international system. During the post-Cold War period, the world remained relatively orderly while witnessing regional conflicts. However, the international order began to lose stability with the 2008 financial crisis, starting with economic instability and extending to political and security domains. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger expressed deep concerns about the evolution of the contemporary international order in his book "World Order," identifying the crisis of the international order as the fundamental problem in current international affairs. The 2015 Munich Security Conference theme was "Collapsing Orders, Reluctant Guardians." Crises in Ukraine, Syria and the geopolitical turmoil in the Asia-Pacific region have arisen from this disorder, showcasing the prevailing international disorder.

Western scholars attribute the destabilization of the international order mainly to the challenge posed by China and Russia to the existing U.S.-led international order. Russia's Secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, has conveyed concerns to President Putin,

stating that the world situation will no longer be simple and that there will be complex global and regional security conditions. Suppose external factors primarily influencing Sino-Russian relations before the end of World War II were Japan, after World War II, and up to the present. In that case, the United States is the primary external factor impacting Sino-Russian relations. Russian scholars even suggest that within the triangular relationship, China and Russia must increase their strategic cooperation to navigate the complexities of Sino-Russian-U.S. interactions better. "The Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship plays a stabilizing role in the international context. While the relationship between China and Russia is gradually getting closer, there is still a lack of strategic depth and a global perspective."

The transformation of the international strategic landscape and changes in global power structures have influenced the development of the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship. The international landscape is transitioning from a unipolar world, where the United States attempted to unite politically and militarily developed nations and members of economic integration organizations as the "pole," to a situation where the center of the multipolar world is shifting to the Eurasian region. Within this context, China plays a significant role in terms of economic development, while Russia, India, China, and Iran each possess their advantages. These nations form the center of the multipolar world around the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The world is evolving toward a new structure and order, but this is a long-term process. The dominance of the world's leading powers, including the United States and others, will persist during this process. For a considerable time, U.S. hegemonic policies are unlikely to change, determining that the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship will remain a long-term scenario characterized by evolving centers of power and mutual constraints. Moreover, the geographic scope affected by the Sino-Russian-U.S. triangular relationship primarily focuses on the Asia-Pacific region, especially the areas surrounding China and Russia.

The Structural Strategic Contradictions Determine the Long-term Asymmetrical Dynamic Evolution of the China-Russia-United States Triangular Relationship

The structural contradictions among nations constitute the fundamental nature and character of international relations, exerting long-term influence and regulating the

development of bilateral relationships. The depth and intensity of structural contradictions vary among different countries. Structural contradictions between Russia and the United States have resulted in enduring challenges, making improvements in their relationship highly difficult, thus keeping it delicate and volatile.

First and foremost, there is a deep-seated contradiction between Russia's imperial ambitions and the democratic values of the United States. After the Cold War's end, Western expectations were that Russia would recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of newly independent states, allowing nations the right to choose their foreign policy direction. However, Russia has remained staunch in asserting its traditional sphere of influence, viewing any integration of former Soviet republics into Western-dominated structures as a threat to its security. The crisis in Ukraine brought out Russia's imperial consciousness, causing alarm and apprehension in the United States and the West.

Secondly, the European issue has sharply contrasted the U.S. and Russia. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States and Europe have struggled to establish a new European-Atlantic security system relevant to Russia. Russia has strongly called for renegotiating the security architecture of Europe, but the U.S. and Western nations have been reluctant to follow suit. NATO's eastward expansion and the EU's enlargement have disrupted the balance of power in Europe without establishing international rules. Western support for Ukraine has led to an adversarial relationship with Russia, particularly Poland and the Baltic states. The U.S. sanctions on Russia have also had a significant economic impact on the European Union. In the future, the EU may separate security and economic considerations and enhance practical cooperation with Russia. Restoring Russia-EU relations could influence other European countries with close economic ties to Russia. Evading the impact of U.S. sanctions on cooperation is a significant challenge in Russia-EU economic relations. Moreover, the intertwined issues of strategic security and ideology have profoundly affected Russia-U.S. relations, creating a strategic structural contradiction that fosters a precarious relationship constantly on the brink of crisis. In the China-Russia-U.S. triangular relationship, the Russia-U.S. link is the weakest, with China-Russia relations free from such structural contradictions, contributing to more excellent stability.

Lastly, remnants of Cold War thinking persist, and Russia-U.S. relations have been moving toward a new Cold War. The annexation of Crimea pushed Russia-U.S. relations to the brink of a new Cold War. Russia's expulsion from the G8, Western economic sanctions, increased NATO deployments near Russia's western borders, and frequent military exercises in the Baltic and Black Sea areas all signal the arrival of a new Cold War. Furthermore, the United States and the West believe that they won the Cold War and that Russia has not received equal treatment and respect in international affairs. This results from an ideological opposition rather than a mere policy difference. The 2013 edition of Russia's "Foreign Policy Concept" emphasized that the attempt by the United States to impose its values on other nations would lead to a chaotic and uncontrollable international environment.

(III) Prominent Characteristics of the Relative Changes in National Power in the China-Russia-United States Triangular Relationship

The essence of the conflict between status quo powers and rising powers lies in the contradictions arising from changes in relative national power. The primary strategic interest of status quo powers is maintaining their dominance in the international system.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the gap in comprehensive national power between China and the United States has gradually narrowed. China boasts the world's second-largest economy, with defense spending exceeding \$100 billion. It is a top destination for international students, and Chinese is the second most widely spoken foreign language after English. These factors have generated tensions between China, the rising power, and the United States, the status quo power. The United States, backed by its robust military and economic power, promotes its universal values and follows an interventionist approach while attempting to spread its ideology worldwide. However, the United States has become burdened by the consequences of its global involvement, including economic decline and a challenge to its hegemonic position. Simultaneously, the worsening state of non-traditional security globally, such as the fight against international terrorism, prevention of nuclear proliferation, and climate change, has made it challenging for the U.S. to tackle these issues alone. As a result, the United States is compelled to adopt a policy of both containment and cooperation with China and

Russia. Cooperation will persist in some critical multilateral issues between the United States, China, and Russia. However, the relationship between the United States and China and between the United States and Russia will remain constrained by the contradictions stemming from the relative changes in national power, retaining the current status quo.

(III) Future Trends in the China-Russia-United States Triangular Relationship and China's Response

The foreign policy strategies of China, Russia, and the United States will continue to underpin the evolution of the China-Russia-United States triangular relationship.

The foreign policy strategies of China, Russia, and the United States play a crucial role in shaping the triangular relationship between these countries. These strategies determine the interactions, alliances, and conflicts among the three nations, influencing the overall dynamics of their relationship. Additionally, the foreign policy strategies of China, Russia, and the United States also impact their engagements with other countries and regions, indirectly affecting the triangular relationship between them. These strategies define their priorities, interests, and approaches to global affairs, influencing their actions and decisions in relation to each other. By shaping their respective foreign policies, China, Russia, and the United States can either strengthen or strain their triangular relationship. Furthermore, the foreign policy strategies of China, Russia, and the United States also reflect their geopolitical ambitions, economic interests, and security concerns. These strategies include geopolitical calculations, economic partnerships, military alliances, diplomatic maneuvers, and ideological competition. By pursuing different foreign policy strategies, China, Russia, and the United States are constantly navigating their triangular relationship. In this complex geopolitical landscape, the foreign policy strategies of China, Russia, and the United States serve as guiding principles for their actions and engagements with each other. (Güneylioğlu, 2023) (Ivire & Lee, 2020)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article delves into the prevailing contradictions between established global powers and ascendant nations within the realm of international politics, with a specific focus on the intricate relationships involving the United States, China, and Russia. These three nations are pivotal actors in the international arena, and the dynamics of their relative strengths

are instrumental in molding the future of the global order. While competition and disagreements are inherent to their interactions, it is essential to emphasize that cooperation will endure in select domains.

Looking ahead, the efficacy of each nation's foreign policy strategies will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the equilibrium of global geopolitics. The international community will remain closely attuned to these dynamics as international relations undergo further transformations. As the world navigates this intricate interplay of power and interests, these relationships will remain at the forefront of global scrutiny, influencing the course of international politics in the years to come.

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