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Interactive model of the China-US-Russia triangle relationship: Theoretical analysis and development prospect

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Abstract. This study examines the interactions within the China-US-Russia triangle using the two types of strategic triangle theory. By analyzing Dittmer's four models — family triangle, romantic triangle, stable marriage, and unit veto — it explores the evolving dynamics between these three countries. Currently, the relationship between China, the US, and Russia most closely resembles a stable marriage, where China and Russia cooperate against the United States. As a global power, the United States attempts to contain China and Russia through two lines, especially through economic, military and diplomatic means to suppress China's rise, while countering Russia's geopolitical threats. China and Russia have gradually approached under the pressure of the United States and formed a stable strategic cooperative relationship, especially in the fields of energy, military and diplomacy with a focus on handling Western sanctions and pressures. Drawing on Martin White's dynamic triangle model, the study also explains the semi-final type of the triangle relationship and suggests various future possibilities for the relationship between the three nations.

Keywords: strategic, triangle theory, stable marriage type, semi-final type, USA

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Интерактивная модель трехсторонних отношений Китай — США — Россия: теоретический анализ и перспективы развития

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Аннотация. Рассмотрено взаимодействие Китай — США — Россия с использованием теории «стратегического треугольника». Приведен подробный анализ четырех моделей Ло Демина: семейный треугольник, романтический треугольник, стабильный брак и единоличное вето, которые описывают развивающуюся динамику отношений между тремя странами. Отношения между Китаем, США и Россией больше всего напоминают «стабильный брак», в котором Китай и Россия сотрудничают против Соединенных Штатов Америки. Соединенные Штаты Америки, являясь сверхдержавой, пытаются сдерживать Китай и Россию по нескольким направлениям: используя экономические, военные и дипломатические средства для замедления экономического роста Китая, одновременно противодействуя геополитическим угрозам России. Китай и Россия постепенно сблизились под давлением Соединенных Штатов и сформировали стабильные стратегические отношения сотрудничества, особенно в области энергетики, вооруженных сил и дипломатии, с акцентом на преодоление западных санкций и геополитического давления США. С опорой на модель «динамического треугольника» Мартина Уайта рассмотрены будущие возможности для развития отношений между тремя странами, включая потенциал для создания более сильного союза или ведения войны на истощение.

Ключевые слова: теория стратегического треугольника, стабильный тип взаимоотношений, полуфинальный тип

Вклад авторов. Все авторы участвовали в разработке концепции обзора, написании текста рукописи, формулировке выводов.

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Introduction

During the Cold War, after Sino-Soviet relations broke down, the United States encouraged the formation of a “strategic triangle” between the US, the Soviet Union, and China. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world order, this strategic triangle faded from the international stage. After the Cold War, global forces underwent a new phase of realignment, leading to significant changes in the international system. This was especially true

after the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted in February 2022, when the US imposed severe sanctions on Russia, further escalating the geopolitical and security tensions between the US and Russia. Meanwhile, the US continues to advance its “Indo-Pacific” strategy to contain China.

China, while maintaining a strong strategic partnership with Russia, pursues an independent and peaceful foreign policy. As the balance of power shifts, interactions between China, the US, and Russia have also changed considerably. A new triangular relationship is forming between these three powers, shaped by power dynamics, geopolitics, and values. The relationships between China and the US, China and Russia, and Russia and the US are becoming key factors influencing the evolution of the global landscape. The return to geopolitical thinking, especially after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, has become more apparent, and the China-US-Russia triangle is adjusting accordingly. Currently, a pattern of cooperation between China and Russia to counter US “dual containment” has taken shape.

In the midst of the intensifying strategic competition between China and the US, and the growing confrontation between Russia and the US, the geopolitical importance of the China-US-Russia triangle has become more prominent. The interactions and relationship trends among these three nations have attracted significant attention and are directly impacting the transformation of the global order. These dynamics are crucial to the evolution of the international landscape and the shaping of a new global order. Therefore, this article analyzes the interaction patterns of the China-US-Russia triangle from both dynamic and static perspectives.

Literature Review

Research on the Interactive Model of Triangular Relationships

Scholars have conducted extensive research on the interactive patterns of triangular relationships. According to the classification of classical theorists, these patterns can be divided into two main categories: static and dynamic.

The static interaction model was first introduced by Theodore Caplow and later developed by Lowell Dittmer. In 1956, Caplow conducted a theoretical analysis of three-party interactions, focusing on alliances. He argued that such interactions often lead to two parties joining forces against a third, with the weaker party typically teaming up against the stronger one. Caplow proposed six theoretical models for triangular relationships based on differences in power distribution among the actors. These models include both balanced and unbalanced power relationships [1. P. 489–493].

Dittmer is considered a key figure in the study of triangle theory. He approached the interaction between China, the US, and the Soviet Union from a game theory perspective, describing it as “a transaction between three players”. Dittmer categorized the interactions into two types: positive and negative. He identified three basic models of a three-party game:

- a. Family Triangle: All three parties are symmetrical, harmonious, and friendly toward one another.
- b. Romantic Triangle: The “hub” actor has harmonious relationships with two “wing” actors, but the two wings oppose each other.
- c. Stable Marriage: Two actors share a harmonious partnership, while the third party is in opposition.

Dittmer considered the family triangle and stable marriage to be positive relationships, while the romantic triangle represents a negative one. Dittmer pioneered the use of strategic triangle theory by applying these models to explain the changing relations between China, the US, and the Soviet Union. He argued that a scenario where all three parties coexist is the most beneficial for everyone involved. However, because each actor prioritizes their own interests, the “hub” in a romantic triangle tends to gain the most advantage [2].

Later, Dittmer added a fourth model to the theory, called the *Unit Veto*, in which all three actors are mutually opposed (fig. 1).

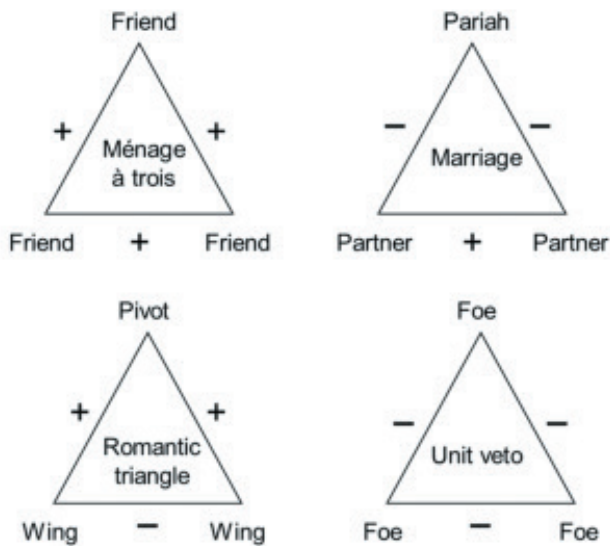


Fig. 1. Dittmer’s four strategic triangle models

Source: made by N.N. Yagodka, Y. Wang using Microsoft Word based on [2].

Wu Yushan proposed a model showing how a large triangle influences a smaller triangle and how the two interact in his double triangles model. He developed a model of simultaneous interaction between the two triangles and analyzed the behavioral choices of the larger triangle from the structural perspective of the smaller one (fig. 2) [3].

Brantly Womack also expanded on Dittmer’s triangle model by proposing the concepts of soft triangles and hard triangles. He argued that in a soft triangle, while the third party influences the relationship between the other two, it does not determine it, meaning that an actor can choose to engage in another triangle

relationship. In contrast, a hard triangle is one where the third party simultaneously affects all bilateral relationships, and the actor's choices are constrained by the structure of the triangle's interactions. The hard triangle better reflects the dynamics of a strategic triangle [4. P. 112–113]. Womack also introduced the concept of asymmetry in international politics, combining it with Dittmer's triangle theory. He proposed the idea of an asymmetric triangle relationship, where the unequal power dynamics between the actors cause the number of possible triangle relationship types to increase, thereby altering the modes of interaction between the three parties.

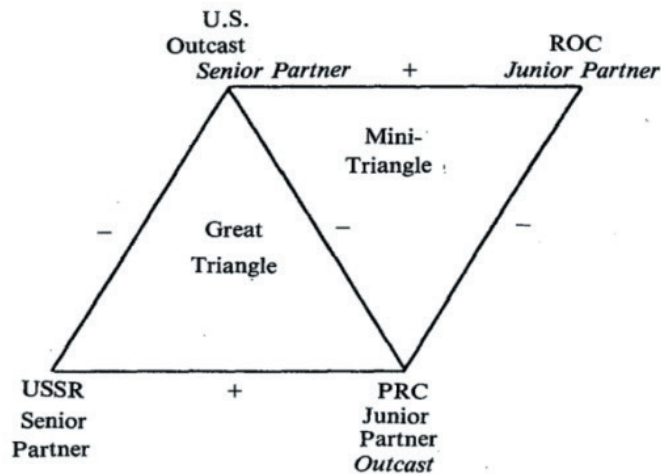


Fig. 2. Double triangle interaction model

Source: made by by N.N. Yagodka, Y. Wang using Microsoft Word based on [2].

In triangular relationships, actors can be categorized into four models based on power differences: the symmetrical triangle ($X = Y = Z$), the unipolar bilateral asymmetric triangle ($X > Y = Z$), the bipolar bilateral asymmetric triangle ($X = Y > Z$), and the trilateral asymmetric triangle ($X > Y > Z$). Building on this, Wu Benli further refined these four power models by considering positive or negative bilateral relationships, creating 32 sub-models of triangular relationships. Of these, 8 are symmetrical triangles, while 24 are asymmetrical [4. P. 112–113].

The dynamic model is represented by Martin Wight, who classified the interaction patterns of triangular actors into four types:

- a. Decisive battle type.
- b. Semi-final type.
- c. First round competition type.
- d. Preliminary type [5. P. 179].

Lin Jiwen also introduced a domestic politics perspective, proposing a two-level triangular game model. He aimed to give the traditional theoretical paradigm a dynamic individual basis by emphasizing how changes in domestic leadership

and the capacity of actors to alter the status quo influence triangular relationships. He considered national interests, political systems, and status quo factors as key in shaping friendship or hostility between countries.

Research on China-US-Russia Triangle Relations

As three power centers with a significant impact on the development of the international situation, the interaction and changes in the triangular relationship between China, the United States, and Russia have always been the focus of research.

Research on the Current Situation, Characteristics, and Development Trends of China-US-Russia Relations

An accurate description of the current situation, characteristics, and development trends of China-US-Russia relations is the basis for exploring the laws of their interaction. Through the analysis the China-US-Russia triangular relationship in reality, domestic and foreign scholars have generally formed the following views:

Chinese scholars believe that the characteristics of China-US-Russia relations are the coexistence of competition, game, conflict, and cooperation. For example, Yu Zhengliang and Li Xiaoyi believes that the strategic relationship between China, the United States, and Russia changes with the changes in strategic threats, is unbalanced, and reflects the characteristics of hedging and complex game, competition, conflict, and cooperation [6. P. 1–23].

Russian scholars believe that China and Russia should strengthen cooperation in various fields to cope with US containment. For example, Dmitry Trenin, a senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences, believes that the confrontation between Russia and Western countries has continued to develop since the Ukrainian crisis. After the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia and the West have turned into a direct confrontation. Although China and Russia are not formal allies, the United States believes that the relationship between the two has exceeded the formal alliance. Although China has not joined the sanctions against Russia, due to concerns about being implicated in the sanctions, China-Russia cooperation is limited. The United States regards Russia as a real threat and regards China as a major competitor. In the future, Russia should maintain military, diplomatic, and economic cooperation with China to cope with US containment [7]. Victor Pirozhenko believes that the United States is launching a strategic confrontation against China and Russia at the same time to achieve its goal of weakening the strength of Russia and China. By provoking internal conflicts and escalating public opinion, it is preparing to isolate China while provoking Russia [8].

Most of American and European scholars generally believed that the United States is the main driving force for the strengthening of China-Russian cooperation. For example, A. Stent, a scholar at Georgetown University in the United States, believes that the turning point in Sino-Russian relations occurred after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. The severe sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and

other Western countries led to its shift to China [9]. Ken Allison of Harvard University believes that China and Russia respond to the threat of the United States by developing and consolidating a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership [10]. Z. Brzezinski believes that the alliance between China and Russia will bring huge risks to the United States [11]. Mercy A. Kuo believes that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will increase Russia's dependence on China. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership is in line with China's long-term strategic priorities and national interests. China will take this opportunity to weaken the leadership of the United States [12]. Timothy R. Heath, a senior researcher at the Rand Corporation in the United States, believes that due to deep-seated structural driving factors, the competition between China and the United States will intensify, and there may be both low-intensity indirect conflicts and high-intensity wars between China and the United States [13]. James Jay Carafa, vice president of foreign and defense policy research at the Heritage Foundation, believes that Russia and the United States are engaged in a new type of war. In order to cope with the EU energy crisis after sanctions on Russia, the United States and its allies need to formulate serious defense and energy policies to ensure that they can deal with future threats from Russia [14].

Research on Interactive model of the China-US-Russia triangle relationship

The interaction model is the core of the study on the China-US-Russia triangular relationship. There are many scholars who analyze the interaction model of China-US-Russia triangular relationship at some certain time with various theories.

Chinese scholars tend to believe that the interactive mode of the China-US-Russia triangle is an unequal triangle. For example, Bi Hongye believes that the relationship between China, the United States, and Russia is an unequal triangle, in which the China-US relationship is the main axis with global significance. The triangle relationship presents the characteristics of power embedding, bilateral dependence, competitive game, and zero-sum game. After the Ukrainian crisis, a situation of China-Russia cooperation to deal with the “double containment” of the United States has basically been formed [15].

Russian scholars have different views on this issue from European and American scholars. Russian scholars believe that the interaction of the China-US-Russia triangle is a one-to-two model. For example, Victor Larin believes that given the strong anti-Russia and anti-China tendencies in the United States, the United States firmly opposes China and Russia, and there is no chance for the United States to establish tactical cooperation with China or Russia. China-Russia cooperation is benefit for both, and the United States is the most unstable part in the triangle [16].

American and European scholars believe that the interaction of the China-US-Russia triangle is not a simple one-to-two model. Vu Le Thai Hoang and Huy Nguyen believe that the interaction of the China-US-Russia triangle is not a simple one-to-two model but a one-to-one plus one model. They proposed that the

triangular interaction model should not be simply defined as a temporary “marriage of convenience” full of distrust. Although the cooperation between China and Russia has its limitations, it is more about the common interests of the two countries in the energy field. The depth of cooperation between China and Russia depends on the attitude of the United States [17].

Research on the impact of China-US-Russia relations on the construction of a new international order

Chinese scholars have proposed that the China-US-Russia triangle is a key factor in promoting the construction of a new international order. After a detailed analysis of this issue, they have concluded that China can use the China-US-Russia triangle structure through diplomatic means to promote the establishment of a new international order. For example, Zhao Huasheng believes that the China-US-Russia strategic triangle is an objective structural form. In the future, China can use superb diplomatic means to constructively use the China-US-Russia triangle structure to promote the establishment of a new international order [18].

Russian scholars believe that the confrontation and conflict between China and the United States already have a profound impact on the entire international community. For example, Sokolshik Markovich believes that China's economic scale and ability pose a huge challenge to the United States and attract many countries. They learn from Chinese political and economic systems and no longer be obsessed with the so-called Western model. This has caused dissatisfaction in the United States and led to confrontation between the two sides. The process and results of the confrontation between the two sides have brought serious risks to the world order [19].

American and European scholars believe that the United States has begun a new Cold War with China and Russia in multiple fields. Stuart Ford believes that the United States is engaged in a new Cold War with Russia and China, there are four possible development prospects in the future: China's economic collapse, US collapse, hot war, and maintaining the status quo [20].

Theoretical framework and analysis

Static triangle

Dittmer's strategic triangle theory is an important tool for analyzing the interaction between the three countries in international relations, and is particularly applicable to the current China-US-Russia relations. According to this theory, the interaction between the three countries can be summarized into four triangle models: family triangle, romantic triangle, stable marriage and unit veto. Through these models, we can understand how the three parties interact in the political, economic and security fields, and predict the possible direction of future evolution.

The current Sino-Russian relationship conforms to the “stable marriage” model two actors (China and Russia) form a partnership to jointly confront a third country (the United States). In this model, the basis for Sino-Russian cooperation is relatively solid, and the two countries have formed strategic consensus in many fields to confront the global hegemony of the United States.

Sino-Russian cooperation is increasingly evident in international affairs, especially in multilateral platforms such as BRICS countries and the SCO, where the two countries try to coordinate their positions to oppose the Western-dominated global order. Also China and Russia have strengthened cooperation in the economic field, especially in energy supply, military technology sharing and infrastructure investment. In particular, the United States has implemented a policy of dual containment against China and Russia in international affairs. Although China-Russian relations are relatively stable, this “stable marriage” model still has its limitations, such as the economic and technological fields. Without sanctions from western countries, the basis of Russia and China’s cooperation may change (fig. 3).

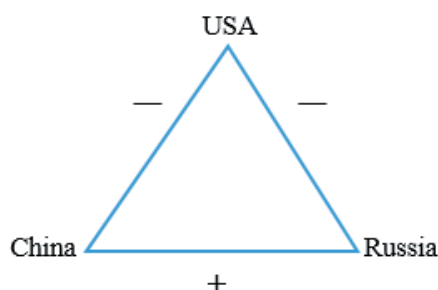


Fig. 3. Stable marriage model between China-US-Russia

Source: made by by N.N. Yagodka, Y. Wang using Microsoft Word.

Dynamic Triangle

According to Martin White’s dynamic triangle model, he divides the interaction between the actors in the triangle into four main types. Two of them match the current situation of the triangle between China-US-Russia relation.

These types provide a unique perspective for understanding the strategic balance and interaction among the three countries and are particularly valuable for analyzing the China-US-Russia triangle.

Decisive Battle Type

In this model, one country in the triangle relationship defeats the other two countries by overwhelming force and eventually becomes the dominant force. The other two countries are ranked in turn, forming a master-slave relationship. This is a zero-sum game situation, in which the victory of one country means the failure of the other two countries. Obviously this model is not applicable in the China-US-Russia triangle.

Semi-finals

In the semi-final mode, the two countries unite to defeat the third country, after that the two countries may continue to cooperate, or confront each other as their power gradually approaches, forming a new power competition pattern. This is a typical “joint and balances” mode.

The situation of China-Russia cooperation against the United States in the China-US-Russia triangle fits this semi-final pattern. In recent years, as the United States promotes the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” globally and NATO continues to expand, China and Russia have cooperated on many international issues. Now the situation is like “joint and balances” against the United States. However, in the long run, China-Russia cooperation does not mean that there is no potential competition between the two sides. Therefore, this model may evolve into a new power competition between China and Russia as the international situation changes.

First round competition type

In this model, the competition between the three great powers is so intense that their resources are depleted and their strength is exhausted. Eventually, none of the three powers can maintain their own power and may be conquered or influenced by external forces. This usually happens when the three powers are involved in a long war of attrition and are finally controlled by external factors.

In modern China-US-Russian relations, the possibility of a first-round competition is relatively small, but not impossible. If China, the United States and Russia continue to be involved in a war of attrition in multiple areas, such as economic competition, military confrontation and geopolitical conflict, it may eventually lead to a decline in the relative strength of the three countries, providing opportunities for other regional or emerging powers, such as India, the European Union and so on. If the trade war between China and the United States continues for a long time and is accompanied by a global economic recession, while Russia continues to be constrained by economic sanctions of the West, the overall strength of the three countries may be damaged. This will provide opportunities for other emerging economies to develop influence.

Preliminary type

In the preliminaries model, two of the three countries form a very close alliance, so that conflict or competition with the third country is no longer meaningful. Eventually, the triangle is weakened or even disappears. This situation shows that a close alliance in the three-country relationship overwhelms other interactions.

This pattern is not common in China-US-Russian relations. In the future, if the cooperation between China and Russia is further strengthened and becomes a formal military alliance, this preliminaries model may appear. However, this situation is unstable because the United States may change the situation through alliances or diplomatic means and re-trigger competition.

Conclusion

The interaction model in the China-US-Russia triangle relationship is not static. Dittmer's static triangle theory and Martin White's dynamic triangle theory provide us with a more flexible theoretical framework for analyzing the China-US-Russia triangle relationship, helping us understand the evolution of China-US-Russia relations.

From the perspective of the static triangle theory, the current China-US-Russia triangle relationship mainly shows a "stable marriage" state. As a global hegemonic country, the United States attempts to contain China and Russia through two lines, especially through economic, military, and diplomatic means to suppress China's rise, while countering Russia's geopolitical threats. China and Russia have gradually approached under the pressure of the United States and formed a stable strategic cooperative relationship, especially in the fields of energy, military and diplomacy.

From the perspective of the dynamic triangle theory, China, the United States and Russia seem to be in a "semi-final" situation, in which China and Russia cooperate on many global issues to check and balance the United States, but at the same time there is potential competition and confrontation in many areas for China and Russia. This situation is not fixed and may change to other modes in the future as the global situation and internal politics change.

Dittmer's and Martin White's four triangular relationship models provide different perspectives for us to understand the dynamic interaction between China, the United States and Russia. The current China-US-Russia relationship best fits the description of the "semi-final" and "stable marriage" model, where the two countries cooperate to check and balance the third country, but there is still inherent competition. However, as the international situation changes, this relationship may shift to other models.

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