

# New Developments of US-Russia Relations and China's Policy Choice

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*Feng Yujun & Shang Yue*

**W**hen US President Donald Trump first came to power, he highly praised Russian President Vladimir Putin and expressed his willingness to improve the bilateral relations, which had rapidly deteriorated in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Senior Russian officials also had high expectations for breaking the deadlock with the US. However, the reality over the past year and more shows that the US-Russia relationship has not only failed to achieve "restart," but almost entered a "system crash." The two countries criticized each other with sharp words in many fields, and bilateral relations have further spiraled down. The status quo of US-Russia relations, which is influenced by multiple factors, not only reflects the unbalanced strength and huge gap in mutual understanding of the two countries, but also shows that the conflicts between the two sides are changing from exogenous to endogenous. In the coming period, the US-Russia relationship will evolve around the basic theme of "limited opponents." The continued deterioration of bilateral relations has brought new variables to China's management of major-country relations. For China, an important strategic choice should be bringing the China-US-Russia triangle into positive interactions, rather than more serious conflicts and even confrontation.

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## US-Russia Relations Falling to “Freezing Point”

Since Trump took office, the United States and Russia have been in tit-for-tat conflicts in many fields. The relationship between the two countries has fallen to the lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

First, the United States has imposed more serious sanctions against Russia. Since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the US has launched multiple rounds of sanctions on Russia. Trump, after coming to power, once intended to improve the bilateral relations with Putin, who he thought was also a “strong man” like him. However, due to the evolution of international situation and US domestic politics, Trump’s Russia policy has been under strong pressure from different political forces within the US. As a result, the momentum of US sanctions against Russia has not weakened, but instead got even stronger. In August 2017, Trump reluctantly signed into law a sanctions bill on Russia, which was passed by both chambers of the Congress by an overwhelming majority the previous month.<sup>1</sup> The severity of this bill is manifested in five aspects. First, it identified ten types of targets that can be sanctioned. This list is a lot broader than previous “targeted” sanctions, with Russia’s related energy industries, military industrial enterprises, banks, and institutions accused of interfering in the 2016 US election all listed as targets. Second, the reasons for sanctions are broader. In addition to the Ukraine issue, they have been extended to “corruption,” “human rights violations,” “evasion of sanctions,” “provision of weapons to Syria” and “Russian behavior in the Eurasian region.” These almost cover all aspects of Russia’s internal and foreign affairs that make the US dissatisfied. Third, it declared that the US would never recognize any Russian action to change the territorial status quo by force, including in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, eastern Ukraine and Transnistria. This announcement has also drawn an insurmountable “red line” for completely lifting the sanctions. Fourth, it provides that the President, when making “significant

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1 “Trump Signs Bill Approving New Sanctions against Russia,” *CNN*, August 2, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/02/politics/donald-trump-russia-sanctions-bill/index.html>.

change” related to policy toward Russia, such as lifting sanctions and returning seized diplomatic property, shall report to the Congress, which has the right to veto the President’s decision. Such limits on the President’s diplomatic power by the Congress is very rare in American history. Undoubtedly, it has greatly reduced Trump’s space to adjust the Russia policy. Fifth, the sanctions have been incorporated into the US public law system. This means that even if there is a major turnaround in the US-Russia relations, it is much more difficult to amend this anti-Russian bill than to adjust an executive order. For example, the Jackson–Vanik amendment to the Trade Act passed in 1974, intended to affect US trade relations with countries with non-market economies that restrict freedom of emigration and other human rights, was not abolished until 2012.

It is foreseeable that the sanctions bill would become a major obstacle between the US and Russia and seriously hinder the improvement of bilateral relations. At the end of January 2018, the US Treasury Department expanded the sanctions list, covering an additional 114 Russian politicians, including Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and 96 wealthy businessmen, on grounds of Russian “interference” in the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>2</sup> On April 6, the United States once again waved its “big stick” of sanctions: 24 individuals and 14 companies were added to the list including Secretary of Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Kolokoltsev, CEO of Gazprom Alexey Miller, President of En+ Group Oleg Deripaska and President of VTB Bank Andrey L. Kostin. Most targets in this round of sanctions are members of Putin’s “core circle.” Their assets in the US were frozen, and US citizens were prohibited from transaction with them. The US Treasury Department said that these people and businesses were “more or less” related to the situation in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>3</sup> This is considered to be the most severe sanctions

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2 “Treasury Releases CAATSA Reports, Including on Senior Foreign Political Figures and Oligarchs in the Russian Federation,” US Department of the Treasury, January 29, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0271>.

3 “Treasury Designates Russian Oligarchs, Officials, and Entities in Response to Worldwide Malign Activity,” US Department of the Treasury, April 6, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0338>.

imposed by the Trump administration on Russia to date. As of now, 189 entities and individuals in Russia have been sanctioned.

Second, the “diplomatic expulsion war” between the two sides was escalated. At the end of 2016, before leaving office, President Obama expelled 35 Russian “intelligence officers” and shut down two Russian diplomatic facilities in the United States with the excuse of Russia’s malicious cyber-attacks against the US and intervention in the US presidential election. In order to deliver goodwill to the new President Trump, Putin temporarily put aside the issue and did not immediately respond to the US actions. However, the “spring” of Russia-US relations did not arrive as expected. In July 2017, when the US imposed new sanctions on Russia, as a “delayed revenge,” the Russian government required the US diplomatic missions in Russia to cut its staff to 455, equivalent to the staff number of Russian missions in the US. In addition, it also denied the US embassy’s right to use two of its properties in Moscow from August 1. In response, the US required Russia to close its San Francisco consulate and two diplomatic agencies in Washington and New York, and greatly reduced, even once temporarily suspended, the issuance of visas for Russian citizens to go to the US. Russia’s diplomatic agencies in San Francisco and Washington were also searched by the US. The strange intoxication of Russia’s former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom in March 2018 again provoked bilateral tensions. On March 29, the United States ordered 60 Russian diplomats accused of “espionage” to leave the US within one week and closed the Russian consulate in Seattle. Russia, not to be outdone, immediately ousted 60 US diplomats and closed the US consulate in St. Petersburg as an equivalent move.

Third, the “media sanctions war” between the two countries intensified. The two sides stepped up using their respective foreign agent laws and identified each other’s media outlets as “foreign agents,” greatly reducing the media’s space on their respective territories. On November 13, 2017, according to the Foreign Agents Registration Act, the US identified the RT TV network, which was sponsored by the Russian government and watched by 2 million people each week, as a foreign agent and revoked

its qualification to interview in the US Congress. (On April 1, 2018, RT officially stopped broadcasting in the US.) In response, Putin signed an amendment about the media's foreign agent status on November 25. According to this law, media outlets that receive financial support from foreign governments or foreign organizations shall be identified as foreign agents. On December 5, the Russian Ministry of Justice identified nine US and European media outlets, including the Voice of America, as foreign agents and implemented corresponding restrictions. Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary for the President of Russia, accused the US authority of being arbitrary, and seriously violating the values of "freedom of speech and the press" that it advocated.<sup>4</sup> This "media sanctions war" reflects further escalation of the two countries' contest in the field of values and propaganda. In the confrontation of the "information wars," the media became both pioneers and victims.

Finally, the contest in the Middle East between the US and Russia entered a new stage. Since its military action in Syria on September 30, 2015, Russia has achieved multiple goals in the Middle East with strong military operations. It has not only hit the "Islamic State" and saved the Bashar regime, but also gradually grasped the leading position in the Syrian situation and maintained the important geostrategic fulcrum on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. More importantly, through active maneuver in the region, Russia consolidated its strategic cooperation with Iran, further united Turkey, and took the opportunity to approach Saudi Arabia, which effectively enhanced its geopolitical influence in the Middle East. At the same time, however, along with the improvement of anti-terrorism situation in Syria, the "dividends" of the two countries on jointly countering terrorism in this region have almost exhausted. As a result, conflicts and differences between the two sides gradually emerged again. The anti-terrorism cooperation, which had been built on weak foundations, was in danger of a total breakdown. At

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<sup>4</sup> Песков назвал лишение аккредитации RT в США нарушением свободы слова. // Российская газета. 30 ноября 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/11/30/peskov-nazval-lishenie-akkreditacii-rt-v-ssha-narusheniem-svobody-slova.html>.

the beginning of 2018, it was reported that the US military killed more than 200 Russian mercenaries in Syria in its operations. Immediately following the poison gas attack in Douma, the largest town in rebel-held Eastern Ghouta on April 8, the US State Department immediately claimed that Russia “shall take full responsibility” if the incident involved deadly chemical weapons.<sup>5</sup> The US, the UK and France then raided on three target facilities in Syria. The proxy war in Syria between Russia and the US became more and more complicated and dangerous, with both sides facing huge risks of direct military conflicts. In addition, with the rise of Iran in the Middle East in recent years, the strategic cooperation among the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia has further enhanced. In the future, it is still unclear whether the Middle East will witness the formation of two antagonistic camps, and how the US-Russia geopolitical game in the region will evolve.

### **Internal Logic for Deterioration of US-Russia Relations**

The continuous deterioration of US-Russia relations is neither a result of sudden change, nor a mistake arising out of chance. The evolution of this relationship has profound historical logic and realistic roots. A review of changes in the relationship over the past one year and more since Trump took office shows that the structural conflicts between the two countries are expanding from geopolitics and strategic balance to such fields as domestic politics and values.

First, the power gap between the United States and Russia has further expanded and their strategic security relationship has gone out of balance with accelerated pace. Strength is the primary factor determining the extent of national interests and the existence of security threats. After the international financial crisis in 2008, the opinion of “America in decline” became popular. However, has the United States really declined? From a historical perspective, it is true that the hegemony and influence of the US is

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5 США возложили на Россию ответственность за возможную химатаку в Сирии. // РБК. 8 Апреля 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/04/2018/5ac96b8f9a79472a5ceef7aa>.

not comparable to that when the Cold War just ended. But compared with other countries in present day, the overall national strength of the US has not substantially weakened. As far as the US and Russia are concerned, the gap between the two countries' strengths is not narrowing but widening. Economically, from 2008 to 2017, except for the negative growth in the first two years of the financial crisis, the GDP of the US grew between 1.5% and 3% for eight years.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, the US, with a GDP of \$19.7 trillion, remained the largest economy in the world.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Russia's economic development in the past ten years was greatly affected by a series of negative factors, such as the financial crisis, the collapse of international oil prices, Western sanctions, and the tumbling of the ruble. The dollar-denominated GDP of Russia was almost stagnant at about \$1.3 trillion.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, Russia's GDP was only 6.6% of that of the US, and its per capita GDP (less than \$9,000) was only 15% of the US level (over \$60,000). On the military front, the US defense spending in fiscal year 2018 reached \$639.1 billion,<sup>9</sup> while Russia's dropped sharply from \$66.4 billion at the peak in 2015 to \$46 billion, only 7.2% of the US budget.<sup>10</sup> Although the US is still concerned about Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal, the above data shows that despite an equally strong rival in the past, Russia today is no longer on the same level as the United States even in terms of military. The bilateral "balance" of strategic power is broken with greater speed.

Second, the two countries have wrong understanding of each other with mutual trust weakened sharply. Looking back on the interactions between the US and Russia since the beginning of the 21st century, the attitudes and

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6 "Real GDP Growth of the United States from 1990 to 2017," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/188105/annual-gdp-of-the-united-states-since-1990>.

7 "National Income and Product Accounts - Gross Domestic Product: Fourth Quarter and Annual 2017 (Third Estimate), Corporate Profits: Fourth Quarter and Annual 2017," The Bureau of Economic Analysis, March 28, 2018, <https://www.bea.gov/newsreleases/national/gdp/gdpnewsrelease.htm>.

8 Сергей Шелин Гордитесь неудачами! // Росбалт. 16 марта 2018, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2018/03/16/1689297.htm>.

9 "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Proposal," US Department of Defense, May 23, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1190216/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2018-budget-proposal>.

10 "Russia to Shell out \$46 Bln on Defense Spending in 2018," TASS, December 22, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/982575>.

opinions of the two countries have always been incompatible, no matter on the international political and economic order and security situation after the Cold War, or on the assessment of their own national interests and international status. The two sides' stark differences in views regarding international strategy, world order and political values have fundamentally made it difficult for them to treat each other as equals and coexist peacefully. Instead, disputes, conflicts and confrontations have always been the "main theme" of the relationship.

Out of misgivings about Russia and resentment at its uncertain pattern of behavior, the United States has never really regarded Russia as a "normal state" or a "partner." In early 20th century, the US had adopted a policy of isolation and interference toward the Soviet Russia after the October Revolution. The complicated alliance, formed at the height of the Second World War, was also put to an end not long after the war. During the Cold War, successive US administrations inherited the containment strategy proposed by Mr. George Kennan, guarding against, weakening and containing Russia. The conclusion of the Cold War, marked by the disintegration of Soviet Union, further strengthened the victor mentality of Americans. The US political elite determined that Russia had lost its global power status and been reduced to a second-tier country. In recent years, the US strategic community, through analysis of incidents like the Russia-Georgia war and the Ukraine crisis, has mostly come to the conclusion that Russia is a subversive force against the current international order, and has blamed the rising expansionist desire within Russian elite for a series of conflicts between the two countries.

More importantly, with the deepening of investigation on Russian meddling in the US election, the United States' concerns about Russia are no longer confined to geopolitical ambitions, but have extended to Russia's challenges to the political system and values of the US and its allies, as well as multiple threats to the US-led international order. The latest US National Security Strategy, released in December 2017, listed a series of Russian "crimes," including: challenging American power, influence, and interests,

attempting to erode American security and prosperity, determined to make economy less free and fair, to grow the military, and to control information and data to repress the society and expand its influence; developing advanced weapons and capabilities that could threaten the United States' critical structure and its command and control architecture; using information operations as part of its offensive cyber efforts to influence public opinion across the globe, blending covert intelligence operations and false online personas with state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or "trolls"; using information tools in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies, and targeting media, political processes, financial networks, and personal data to interfere in the domestic political affairs of countries around the world; creating an unstable frontier in Eurasia by combing ambition and growing military capabilities, thus increasing the risk of conflict; viewing NATO and the EU as threats, and dividing the US from its allies and partners to weaken US influence in the world; as a revisionist power, actively competing against the US and its allies and partners across political, economic, and military areas in order to shift international order in its favor and shape a world antithetical to US values and interests.<sup>11</sup> The American elite's perception of Russia reflected in the new document forms the ideological basis for anti-Russian sentiments in the US, which is deeply rooted and hard to be resolved in the short term.

The Russian elite, however, have another perspective. Russia always views itself as a "global power" and "one of the world's independent poles." It believes that it shoulders the sacred mission of a "Third Rome," and still hopes to address international problems with the United States as equals, like in Soviet era. Objectively speaking, since the time of Peter the Great, Russia has been looking to the West wholeheartedly, but the West has never regarded it as "brother of the same blood."<sup>12</sup> After the Soviet Union's

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11 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

12 Feng Yujun, "Russia and the West: A Historical Review of Clash of Civilizations," *Asia Review* (Hong Kong), Fall/Winter 1999.

disintegration, Russia once regarded the United States as a potential ally and partner. However, during the difficult transition from a planned economy to a market economy, the US did not lend a hand to help Russia successfully survive the “painful period.” Instead, through NATO’s eastward expansion and “color revolutions,” the US constantly expanded its presence and influence in the “post-Soviet space,” thus compressing Russia’s strategic space. This has greatly eroded the dignity of Russian elite, and aroused their strong disappointment and dissatisfaction with the US and its Western allies. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin strongly accused the US of its unilateralist policy and abuse of force around the world.<sup>13</sup> After that, Russia began to adopt a series of measures to restore its geopolitical influence in the former Soviet area and challenge the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU. Some Russian experts have pointed out that the unfriendly attitude of Russian elite toward the United States is mainly “the consequence of the Russia policies adopted by the US-led Western countries,” including their neglect and contempt of Russia’s national interests, the provocative policies toward Russia’s allies and partners, and the habitual view of seeing Russia as a “loser.”<sup>14</sup>

To this day, the extreme resentment and disappointment of Russian elite about the United States’ policy has been too hard to eliminate. As reflected in the opinion of Vladislav Surkov,<sup>15</sup> who is Putin’s political aide and hailed as the “gray cardinal” of contemporary Russian politics, although Russia has been trying to integrate into the West for about four centuries, especially attempting to seek Western acceptance again since the end of the 20th century, it still failed to enter the Western threshold even if its population, industry and military strength were largely weakened. As he emphasizes, Russia is a hybrid country with its territory spanning Asia and Europe and

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13 Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности. 10 февраля 2007, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

14 Eduard Ponarin and Boris Sokolov, “The Russian Elite’s View of Global Politics,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 18, 2014, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Russian-Elites-View-of-Global-Politics-17222>.

15 Владислав Сурков Одиночество полукровки. // Россия в глобальной политике. 9 апреля 2018, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Odinochestvo-polukrovki-14-19477>.

its value blending Eastern and Western ideas. Its cultural and geopolitical affiliation is similar to the identity of a child born into a family with parents of different races. It is related to everyone, but it is not considered a relative by anyone. Russia needs to explore the third road, the third civilization, the third world, and the third Rome. Surkov's view highlights the extreme disappointment and resentment of Russian political elite under the context of all-round deterioration of Russia-US relations. It may mark a historic turn of Russia's national development trajectory and identity: rather than pursue re-integration into the West after Soviet disintegration, Russia will seek to foster a unique "Eurasian civilization."

Finally, the so-called Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and the strong repercussions in the US caused by this accusation have accelerated the transition of US-Russia conflicts from being exogenous to endogenous, which further increased the complexity of bilateral relations. For the US, who is accustomed to interfering in other countries' internal affairs, the Russian "meddling" in its election has made its political circle feel "shameful." Such hatred for Russia can hardly be pacified. Four committees of the US Congress as well as an investigation team headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for the Justice Department have been looking into the alleged collusion between Trump's campaign and Russia. While National Security Advisor Michael Flynn and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who are known for their knowledge about Russia, resigned, the new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton have adopted a hawkish hardline attitude toward Russia. It can be said that the relationship with Russia has become a highly sensitive issue in the US domestic politics, and "anti-Russian" has been a kind of "political correctness." In the meantime, in Russia, "anti-America" has also served as an important tool for the authorities to shape "external enemies" and create domestic political consensus.

In fact, the endogenous evolution of the US-Russia conflict has an inevitable logic. Due to the widening gap between the two countries' strengths, the previous bilateral agenda centered on dialogues about global strategic stability has become increasingly hollow, while the economic ties

are too weak for them to carry out win-win cooperation. Therefore, trying to interfere in each other's domestic politics becomes their inevitable choice, which has extended the bilateral structural conflicts from global security and geopolitics to domestic politics. This situation has further aggravated their mutual understanding, causing the US-Russia relationship to fall into a deteriorating "negative cycle."

### **Limited Opponents: "New Normal" of US-Russia Relations**

The spiral decline of US-Russia relations has made many experts believe in the arrival of a "new Cold War." This expression, however, is not appropriate. The Cold War is a specific concept and status. It means all-round competition between two superpowers, all-round antagonism between two ideologies, all-round confrontation between two military camps, and incompatibility between two parallel markets. The current US-Russia relationship does not have these characteristics at all. In terms of national strength, Russia is no longer as strong as the former Soviet Union. Regarding ideology, Russia has basically accepted Western values. Although Russia's domestic political conservatism has prevailed in recent years, there is no such issue as "export of revolution" to the West. On the military level, it is true that Russia has established the Collective Security Treaty Organization with itself at the core, and the US-led NATO and the alliance system in Asia still exist, but it is impossible for the two sides to enter an all-round military confrontation. As for economy, the parallel market with the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance at the core has long ceased to exist, and it is impossible for Russia to rebuild an isolated economic system. The evolution of international situation and the status quo of US-Russia relations have already transcended the Cold War.

In the opinion of the US scholar Angela Stant, "limited partnership" would be the new normal of US-Russia relations in the 21st century.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Angela Stant, *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2013.

However, developments since the Ukraine crisis have shown that the US and Russia have become rivals rather than partners. The two sides have been contesting fiercely in geopolitics, strategic security and domestic politics. However, at the same time, we shall not fail to see that such contest is limited in terms of intensity, breadth and impact. It is more regional than global, and more specific than holistic. In view of the development trend of global order and the two countries, “limited opponents” is becoming the “new normal” of US-Russia relations for a long time to come.

First of all, the obvious gap in national strength has made Russia unable to rival the US on a global scale. Economically, Russia lags far behind the US in terms of both economic size and per capita GDP and is increasingly at the edge of the world economy and international division of labor. Regarding science and technology, the US remains the world’s No.1 innovation power, especially in core technologies and frontier industries such as commercial aircrafts, semiconductors, biotechnology, special chemicals and system software. In contrast, Russia’s scientific and technological strength is greatly impacted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it also suffers from the loss of relevant talents. For a long time, its economic development relies heavily on the export of raw materials. Worse still, the low international oil prices have made its financial system highly overstretched. To a large extent, Russia has lost the objective conditions for a vigorous development of innovative industries. Militarily, compared with the Americans’ strong leadership in global military revolution, Russia is in a disadvantageous position in strategy, technology and army building.

Second, as bilateral conflicts are difficult to be resolved, the two countries will remain in serious antagonism in the next few years. In terms of geopolitics, the contradiction between the US contempt for Russia’s traditional “sphere of influence” and Russia’s strong dignity and sense of insecurity as a major power is difficult to fade away. The “post-Soviet space” is still the main battlefield for the two countries. Concerning military strategic balance, the United States has accelerated the development of aerospace weapons, hypersonic weapons, anti-missile systems and cyber

warfare capabilities, while Russia is focusing on expanding its nuclear arsenals and information warfare forces as asymmetrical responses. The risk of conflicts has not reduced. Regarding domestic politics, while the investigation of Russian interference and collusion has caused continuous ramifications in the US, the anti-American sentiments in Russia have also reached a peak. The trajectory of US-Russia relations will continue to be constrained by internal factors of the two countries. As far as values are concerned, the competition between the universal values advocated by the US-led West and Russia's conservative tendencies is also getting fierce. The two countries will continue to seize the high ground of international public opinion and fight for their discourse power through the "media war." It is predicted by Russian scholar Dmitry Suslov that before the US election in 2020, the US-Russia relationship will remain at a low point and can hardly witness significant changes for the better.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, subjectively neither the United States nor Russia regards the other as the major threat. For the US, the National Security Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review and the National Defense Strategy, released successively from the end of 2017, all believe that great power competition has replaced terrorism as the major external threat to US national security, and that China and Russia are "revisionist powers" and "strategic rivals." However, in view of the reality of the two countries, the US believes that Russia poses a real and urgent threat while China is a long-term challenge. In July 2017, Pompeo, then Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, said in his first interview that while China, Russia and Iran will all pose major challenges to the United States in the future, China, as an economic powerhouse with constantly strengthened military strength, is reducing American influence worldwide and presents the greatest rivalry to the US over the medium and long term.<sup>18</sup> In an interview with BBC on January

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17 "Russia: Mixed Diplomatic Progress and Slow Economic Recovery," *Cankao Xiaoxi*, December 19, 2017, <http://ihl.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2017/1219/2248381.shtml>

18 Stephen Lendman, "CIA Director Pompeo Sees Nonexistent Threats Everywhere," Stephen Lendman website, July 27, 2017, <http://stephenlendman.org/2017/07/cia-director-pompeo-sees-nonexistent-threats-everywhere>.

30, 2018, Pompeo once again asserted that Chinese efforts to exert covert influence over the West are just as concerning as Russian subversion, and the Chinese “have a much bigger footprint” to do this than the Russians do.<sup>19</sup> Given that Pompeo has now assumed the role of Secretary of State, his views will largely influence the US strategic decision-making. From Trump’s recent insistence on launching a trade war against China, it can be seen that the US is increasingly concerned about the rising strength and influence of China, and the strategic competition between the two major countries has unfolded. On the other hand, Russia has long been looking to the West, and Putin is not a downright anti-American president. In many speeches even after the Ukraine crisis, Putin still indicated that Russia would always “open its doors” and hoped to develop “constructive relations” with the United States. Some experts even believe that the anti-American sentiments among Russian elite nowadays are mostly due to their disappointment with not being accepted by the West. If the US actively sought to improve relations with Russia, it is quite possible that anti-Americanism in Russia would quickly subside.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the main challenge facing Putin after his re-election is to develop Russia’s economy. He has indicated on many occasions that he will shift his focus to the domestic agenda.

During US National Security Advisor John Bolton’s visit to Russia in late June 2018, the two sides agreed that Trump and Putin would meet in Helsinki, Finland on July 16. This is Trump’s attempt to make a new breakthrough in diplomacy, with an eye to the upcoming mid-term elections and presidential re-election, after making important progress on the DPRK nuclear issue and imposing more pressure on Iran. It also reflects Putin’s urgent appeal for alleviating the strategic pressure from the US and improving the international environment facing Russia. It can be expected that the two countries would reach a certain compromise on the Syrian situation and the extension of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

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19 “CIA Chief Says China ‘as Big a Threat to US’ as Russia,” *BBC*, January 30, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42867076>.

20 Eduard Ponarin and Boris Sokolov, “The Russian Elite’s View of Global Politics.”

This being said, there has not been a fundamental change in the balance of national strengths and mutual understanding. With the existence of their disputes concerning Crimea and Russian interference in US elections, the US-Russia relationship is far from an overall recovery or “restart.”

## **China-US-Russia Trilateral Relations and China’s Policy Choice**

As US-Russia relations continue to deteriorate and China-US relations enter the “deep water zone,” the trilateral relations among the three sides have once again become a hot topic in the strategic studies circle. Some Chinese scholars advocate “uniting Russia to fight against the US,” while some in Russia have also proposed building an “anti-US united front” with China and other countries. The debate on China-Russia “alignment” has long been existent in the US political and academic circles. In this context, the trilateral relations among China, the US and Russia are still similar to the China-US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War, which does not transcend the mentality of alignment and confrontation. According to traditional geopolitical theory and game theory, a de facto alliance between China and Russia would definitely weaken the pressure from the US and bring other benefits. However, the complexity of contemporary international relations makes this assumption somewhat illusory. More importantly, the Chinese and Russian governments have officially stated that they will not form an alliance. Therefore, although further cooperation between the two countries may objectively upset and put pressure on the US, the real returns cannot be accurately estimated. It is even more difficult to control the spillover of negative effects.

First, the multi-faceted nature of national interests determines that the model of alliance and confrontation cannot meet the actual interests of the three countries. It is true that power is the core concept of realist international relations theory, but in reality every country is faced with a whole set of tasks, including promoting economic development, maintaining social stability, safeguarding national security, and improving governance. At

present, all three countries are challenged by increasingly pressing economic and social problems. The alignment of China and Russia to counter the United States will do no favor to solving more prioritized issues in either country such as economic transformation and domestic political stability. It is also true for the United States.

Second, the limited effectiveness of the existing pattern determines that the alliance and confrontation model will not live up to the expectations of its advocates. According to those who support China-Russia alliance, the two countries' cooperation in countering the US can largely reduce the pressure from the US and expand their respective strategic leeway. In fact, however, the China-Russia partnership of strategic coordination has neither prevented the US from continuing to strengthen military presence in Eastern Europe, nor has it stopped the US military operations in the South China Sea, or forced the US to abandon the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea.

Third, the complexity of international agenda determines that the model of alliance and confrontation cannot solve urgent international and regional problems. Today's international relations are not only confined to geopolitics, but also include a wide range of agendas such as climate change, the scientific and technological revolution, and the reshaping of financial, trade and investment rules. Each agenda has its own characteristics, attributes, logic and rules. The common and vague ideas of geopolitics and the simple model of alignment and antagonism will do no help to solve complex international problems. For example, the reinforcement of local currency swap between China and Russia does not directly affect the hegemony of the dollar.

Fourth, working together to counter the US is not in accordance with the principle basis of China-Russia relations or the subjective will of the two countries. China-Russia relations are based on equality, mutual benefits, reciprocity, win-win cooperation, mutual respect and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. In a large number of political statements, the two countries have reiterated the basic principles of "non-

alignment, non-confrontation, and no targeting at any third party.” Non-alignment has been a steadfast feature of the bilateral relations. As a product from the wartime era and the Cold War period, the term “alignment” has long lost its foundation of existence. In the context of complex and ever changing international situation, working together for common progress is the most appropriate and comfortable way for China and Russia to get along with each other. At least for the time being, neither of them has the will or ability to lead the other and establish a “leadership” in this partnership.

The looseness of contemporary China-US-Russia relations indicates that there is still a lack of close interaction between the three countries. In fact, the three pairs of bilateral relations, namely China-US, China-Russia and US-Russia relationships, have their respective values, problems and development logic. The alignment of China and Russia actually cannot help solve the problems in China-US or Russia-US relations. On the economic front, the strengthened China-Russia economic cooperation cannot fully eliminate the impacts of US sanctions on Russia. In the security field, the interaction between China and Russia cannot address the security concerns between China and the US. The US will not accordingly reduce its security misgivings about China, nor will it relax its military pressure on China.

In summary, the traditional model of alliance and confrontation does not serve the interests of any of the three countries. Whether for their own development, or for international and regional peace and stability, the three countries need to explore a positive way of interaction, solve their respective problems through trilateral cooperation, and assume the responsibility of maintaining global peace and promoting world development. As the Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov said, “The interaction among Russia, China and the United States in solving international problems can bring obvious benefits to the improvement of the international situation.”<sup>21</sup> Of

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21 “Russian Ambassador to China: Russia-China Relations Completely Irrelevant of Ideology,” *Sputnik News*, February 8, 2017, [http://sputniknews.cn/russia\\_china\\_relations/201702081021806921](http://sputniknews.cn/russia_china_relations/201702081021806921).

course, the transition from the old to the new model will be a daunting task that can hardly be done overnight. But only by setting such a goal and taking concrete actions, can the three powers of China, the US and Russia transcend geopolitics, and truly play a constructive role and work together with other countries in the world to tackle global challenges.

Specifically, China, the United States and Russia can cooperate in the following areas:

First, jointly maintaining security in Northeast Asia and providing a holistic solution. Relevant authorities of the three countries may first establish an expert-level mechanism to jointly explore the possible risks of North Korea's nuclear and missile development, discuss the actual effects of THAAD, as well as subsequent implications. Based on careful analysis of crisis scenarios and response programs, the three countries should seek political compromises, and carry out comprehensive discussion and consultation on a wide range of issues, such as establishment of regional nuclear non-proliferation mechanisms, provision of security guarantee for non-nuclear states by nuclear powers, and the challenges of missile defense deployment to regional strategic balance, with an aim to provide a package solution to regional security. Given the recent positive developments on the Korean Peninsula, it is even more necessary for the three countries to discuss the future trajectory of the Peninsula and the long-term security arrangements in Northeast Asia.

Second, carrying out effective counter-terrorism cooperation, and fostering security mutual trust through non-traditional security cooperation. The three countries need to be fully aware of the danger of double standards in counter-terrorism, and further strengthen cooperation in formulating a unified list of terrorist organizations and personnel under the UN and G20 frameworks to cut off the funding channels of terrorist organizations. They should also explore ways to combat the remnants of the "Islamic State," and discuss solutions to the global spread of extremism.

Third, curbing the risk of an arms race and seeking new ways to maintain international strategic balance. With the accelerated advent of

a new round of military revolution, both the United States and Russia have been stepping up modernization of nuclear arsenals, and China's strategic nuclear power has also made progress. At the same time, the three countries have also started competition in the fields of global rapid strike system, missile defense system and cyber warfare. Due to multiple factors, the existing international arms control and disarmament regime is increasingly fragmented with rapidly declining effectiveness. In order to avoid a new arms race and consolidate international security, China, the US and Russia should work with other military powers to conduct practical negotiations on arms control and disarmament in nuclear, outer space and cyberspace fields.

Fourth, from trilateral think tank exchanges, seeking cooperation areas and fostering mutual trust through Track II dialogue and joint research. There were similar exchanges in the past, but it is necessary to alter the previous practice that no follow-up was conducted after meetings. A research team composed of experts from the three countries should be established to study problems in the trilateral relationship, explore cooperation space and paths, and provide the three governments with corresponding policy reference.

At present, the international order is undergoing accelerated transformation, and global and regional challenges are on the increase. At the same time, however, there is a lack of effective solutions for global and regional governance. The relations among major powers are still largely confined to the traditional geopolitical model, which fails to truly respond to global challenges. Facing the real challenges, the three countries and beyond will see greater security threats if they are not able to cope with the "prisoner's dilemma." The exploration of a concrete path to achieve positive interaction among China, the United States and Russia calls for joint efforts of the three sides' political and academic circles. 