



## **China and International Relations (CIR)**



# **The Sino-Russia-US Triangle in the Second Term of Obama Administration**

**Master Thesis by Zhenlin Zhu**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis seeks to explore the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration with a special focus on the interactions among the three state actors on four specific parameters/issues, trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue. The thesis adopts Realism including offensive realism and theory of triangle, and Liberalism composed of neo-liberal institutionalism and economic interdependency to analyze the new triangle. On each parameter, the thesis conducts discussions on the basis of three bilateral relations—Sino-US relations, Sino-Russia relations and US-Russia relations—to understand the triangle of Sino-Russia-US from the microcosmic view. Through analyses, the thesis concludes that different from the classic “romantic triangle” in the Sino-SU-US period, the type of Sino-Russia-US triangle is dynamic due to China’s rise, Russia’s “tough diplomacy” and more complicated international situations, and denotes that the triangle of Sino-Russia-US are still full of uncertainties in the future against the context of changeable international environment, thus making it a significant topic in the international relations.

**Key Words:** triangle, Sino-Russia-US, the second term, Obama administration

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## **1. Introduction**

In the international relations, “triangle” is referred to interactions among three actors, which is conspicuous in the period of the Cold War. The strategic triangle of People’s Republic of China-Soviet Union-United States of America came into shape in the late 1960s with two basic conditions. One is that the US and SU vied for supremacy while any side did not have absolute predominance over the other side. The other is that the alliance between China and SU on the basis of ideology and social system was broken and both sides had clashes over national interests while China adopted an independent foreign policy to alter its attitude towards the US. (Tang, 2012, p. 58) Actually, the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US is a classic representation of zero-sum game with conflict and confrontation (Yu & Li, 2015, p. 3). At that time, the population, land and national product of these three countries accounted for almost one third of that of the world. Besides, two of them boasted the strongest military power, thus making the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US play a key role in determining the direction of the international order and impacting political, economic and cultural relations in the rest of the world in the history. In conclusion, from the historical perspective, the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US has served as the tractor for global situations, and its importance is self-evident.

However, the collapse of SU and the end of the Cold War was almost tantamount to claiming the death of the strategic triangle. Moreover, even in the aftermath of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama led to the conclusion that history, in the sense of ideological and political conflict, had come to an end with final triumph of Western ideological value system in the international relations in his “The End of History?”. (Shaw & Li, 2014, p. 77) Fukuyama’s triumphalism can be the demonstration of recession of the strategic triangle. Though Russia appeared instead and realized its democratization, Russia was weaker and could not embrace the same glory as the former SU did. Apparently, it seemed that the US achieved the supremacy in the world, which meant that cooperation instead of competition would represent the later

international politics. (Lo, 2014, p. 163) Consequently, there was voice that the triangle of Sino-Russia-US was cliché to some extent at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though Russia has never abandoned its ambition to recover its status of a world power, even at the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was still doubt that the triangle of Sino-Russia-US could not maintain the high profile as before, for a weak Russia was marginalized compared with a strong US and a rising China. For example, Russian economic growth rate declined to -7.8% in 2009 after the 2008 global financial crises (Jia & Chen, 2015, p. 60).

During the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the relations among China, Russia and the US have shown some unprecedented features. Especially in the second term of Obama administration (Jan.20, 2013 - Jan.20, 2017), the neo-triangle of Sino-Russia-US developed to the magnet of the world attention again. The 2008 financial crises struck the economic growth of the US, thus resulting in a comparatively declining hegemon with the potential threat of being challenged. At the same time, China developed to the second largest economy in 2011. The later initiative of “The Belt and Road” and the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) illustrated a rising China, which can exert impact on the existing international order. Besides, Russian “tough diplomacy” has played a vital role in disrupting the strategic planning of the US and restarting the triangle. Whether Russia’s controversial control over Crimea in 2014 or its decisive air attack on Islamic State of Iraq and al Shams (ISIS) in Syria in 2015 has shown an upward sense of existence of an influential power in the international stage. Therefore, the once misty triangle comes back. However, the current triangle of Sino-Russia-US is totally different from the one in the period of the Cold War. With the main themes of peace and development, the three countries will not be destined to confrontation. (Shi, 2016, p. 45)

As mentioned above, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration is worthy of attention, for many influential issues came up to be able to shake the international situation, such as Ukrainian issue, the rise of ISIS, the South China Sea issue, “The Belt and Road” by China, Terminal High Altitude

Area Defense (THAAD) and Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) by the US. Both external environment and internal situations have brought about the closer interactions among these three countries, which highlights the triangle on the basis of geopolitics. The US is a conservative power facing challenges; China is an emerging power with strong momentum; Russia is a once power striving to regain its fame (Yang J. , 2014, p. 4). As for Sino-US relations, as the first two largest economies, they are economically interdependent; while politically the US regards a rising China as the threat. Therefore, the US put forward the strategy of “return to Asia” and made a high-profile intervention in the South China Sea issue with the purpose of constraining China. Besides, either China or the US bears the thought of utilizing Russia to balance the power. As for Sino-Russia relations, it is a kind of stable and healthy national relation. Based on Sino-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, both sides show economic complementarity and political mutual trust. Nevertheless, both China and Russia maintain an independent international logic and do have the intention to rely on each other to exert pressure on the US, thus making Sino-Russia relations a subtle one. As for US-Russia relations, it is characterized with more disputes while they understand they still need each other to seek cooperation in some international issues, such as strategic disarmament, counter-terrorism. Moreover, both sides have been aware of China’s importance to coordinate their national interests from the geopolitical perspective.

Therefore, as the basic framework of international system, the development of the triangle of Sino-Russia-US can serve as the politbarometer for international situations. As the important powers, interactions among the three countries can influence the direction of international order instead of the specific region. The triangle of Sino-Russia-US should not be underestimated and it is still of significance to probe into the triangle in the current international environment.

The thesis aims to explore the triangle of Sino-Russia-US under the second term of Obama administration, an active phase of interactions among the three countries as mentioned above. To do so, the thesis will select four issues/parameters, including trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue, to analyze

how these three state actors have been interacting among themselves, thus figuring out what the current triangle of Sino-Russia-US is and how it influences the international order. To understand their interactions, the thesis will discuss them by means of two basic international relations theories: Realism and Liberalism. Realism will include the offensive realism and theory of triangle and Liberalism will focus on economic interdependency theory and neo-liberal institutionalism.

## **2. Literature Review**

The notion of “strategic triangle” embraced prevalence in the international relations during the heyday of the Cold War period (Hsiung, 2004, p. 14). Though there is voice that its glamour has gradually vanished since the collapse of SU, actually the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US has emerged along with dynamic international situations and played an important role in the international community. Besides, in the 1970s, the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US was at the course of “romantic triangle” with the US acting as the “pivot”, while the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US shows different features. In the section of literature review, the arguments and comments of this topic will be reviewed on the basis of two perspectives: the angle of China and the West.

From the point view of Chinese scholars, compared with the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US that is a kind of classic zero-sum game and is characteristic of “life and death” confrontation, the contemporary triangle of Sino-Russia-US is different. The strategic cooperation between China and Russia belongs to positive interactions between rising powers rather than traditional allies. Though the pressure of the US can serve as the external impetus to Sino-Russia coordination, the interactions between China and Russia possess the internal motivation, thus promoting both sides to develop a kind of new partnership with mutual trust and common progress. Therefore, the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US is a hedging and complicated game along with the combination of competition, conflict and cooperation, but their interactions will not fall into Thucydides' trap. (Yu & Li, 2015, p. 3)



As for the three bilateral relations, Chinese scholars hold the opinion that Sino-US relations have generally remained stable but the momentum is intertwined with trouble. The US, the largest developed country, and China, the largest developing country and notably the second largest economy during recent years, assume the common responsibility in coping with global financial crises and maintaining global economic stability. As the mutually major trade partner, they embrace large scale of economic cooperation, which benefits people of both countries. Nonetheless, the trouble still haunts the Sino-US political relations, for the US has considered China's rise as a threat and its policies towards China are featured with anxiety, sensitivity and the Cold War mentality. The US has made its global strategy tilt to the Asia-Pacific region, strengthened US-Japan alliance and conducted the intervention into the South China Sea issue with a high profile, which aims to constrain China's rapid development. Consequently, Sino-US relations are accompanied by both cooperation and competition. (Shi, 2016, p. 46) Compared with Sino-US relations with more challenges, Sino-Russia relations have paved a steady and healthy way for mutual development. Against the context of multi-polarization, China and Russia have opened a new chapter to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation. Both countries share similar strategic demands, regard the other side as the prior cooperation partner, and embrace great potential of economic complementarity. Moreover, both countries have extended their common interests, lying in that first, both sides have carried out trade cooperation; second, cooperation of finance and investment can become the new point in boosting bilateral cooperation; third, the docking between Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Union can create new opportunities for China-Russia comprehensive cooperation. However, both sides have realized that the trade cooperation still serve as their weakness for both China and Russia do not account for much in their respective foreign trade. (Shi, 2016, p. 47) As for US-Russia relations, it has fallen into vicious circle during recent years. After Putin held the office in the Kremlin again, he was in pursuit of the road to a powerful Russia. Though in a state of evident disadvantage compared with the US, Putin integrated the domestic resources and made good use of his abundant experience in

great-power diplomacy to conduct strong moves. Russia launched decisive anti-terror actions in Syria to make a response to the Western sanctions resulted from Ukraine crises. The keynote of US-Russia strategic clashes of interests is surrounded by restraint and anti-restraint, extrusion and anti-extrusion, sanction and anti-sanction, which highlights the reality of an upgrading competition between Russia and the US, while this does not mean that US-Russia relations exclude the possibility of cooperation completely. (Shi, 2016, pp. 46-47) These arguments can be demonstrated in the academic articles of Chinese scholars, such as *The Current Situation and Trend of China-Russia-U.S. Triangle. Peace and Development* by Shi, Ze in No.3 2016, *Peace and Development*; *New Situations of China-Russia-U.S. Strategic Relations* by Yu, Zhengliang and Li, Xiaoyi in No.6 2015, *Forum of World Economics & Politics*.

In conclusion, from the perspective of Chinese scholars, in the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US, Sino-US relations serve as the most important one with contradictions and unsmooth development; Sino-Russia relations serve as the most intimate one with deep cooperation and rapid development; Russia-US relations serve as the most complicated one with intensive games, which is a combination of Realism and Liberalism. They share both competition and cooperation, both divergence and consensus. However, China always attaches more importance to the position of the US and, to some extent, underestimates the role of China and Russia especially after China's rise and Russia's "tough diplomacy", which can be the limitations of Chinese scholars' opinions.

From the point view of the West, in the beginning, the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US is unbalanced for Western critics regard Sino-Russia "strategic partnership" as an authoritarian alliance that may lead to a new, non-democratic world order. In other words, the West considers the Sino-Russia partnership as a threat, a reflection of Realism. However, there is also voice of Liberalism that the West should not see the Sino-Russia partnership, a model of cooperation, as a threat, since China and Russia have different views of the world and approaches to their foreign policies, which means that their apparent consensus is superficial and fragile. The work of *Axis*

*of Convenience Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* by Bobo Lo can be one of the examples for the arguments. According to Bobo Lo, both China and Russia look principally to the West, for Russia attaches more importance to Europe and China emphasizes the US as its indispensable partner. In addition, the West should realize that the stable Sino-Russia relations are conducive to the West to some extent for it is important for Eurasian and global security.

Later, as the national strength changes, the West is more inclined to combine Realism with Liberalism and argues that both China and Russia have reduced their leverage over the US and it seems that China plays the “pivotal” role in the triangle of Sino-Russia-US. According to Western scholars, in the current configuration of Sino-Russia-US triangle, three implications can be summarized (Wishnick, 2015). As Elizabeth Wishnick discusses in *The New China-Russia-U.S. Triangle* in the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) Analysis Brief on December 16, 2015,

(1) Sino-Russia differences are real but unlikely to undermine their overall unity. (...) This is because the bilateral relationship draws its strength from shared normative understandings of global and domestic politics. (...) (2) Russia and China oppose what the United States stands for, though each may cooperate with Washington on particular issues. (3) Sino-U.S. cooperation will not create leverage for the United States over Russia. (Wishnick, 2015)

Besides, some scholars hold the opinion that the postmodern triangle emerges as Russia's relative power decreased. In this postmodern triangle, Russia will be replaced by an official or non-official network composed of various nations, multilateral organizations and non-state actors, because the world will be in a bipolar order dominated by China and the US, as Bobo Lo elaborates in *Russia, China and the United States: From Strategic Triangularism to the Postmodern Triangle* in No.1, Feb. 2014 *Russian Studies* (Lo, 2014, p. 157). From my point of view, there exist two main limitations for the arguments

of the West. First, the West is not able to have a good grasp of the Sino-Russia relations for it either overestimates the negative impact of Sino-Russia relations on the US or underestimates the great potential of a steady and healthy Sino-Russia relations. Second, the role of Russia in the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US is weakened, since Russia still plays a vital role in some geopolitical issues and balancing the Sino-US relations.

Therefore, in my opinion, different from the typical “romantic triangle”—the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US in the period of the Cold War with the US playing the apparent and absolute “pivot” role, the new triangle of Sino-Russia-US is more dynamic, which means that the role of every actor within the triangle is not fixed and each actor can have decisive impact on the type of the triangle under different circumstances, thus leading to a dynamic triangle of Sino-Russia-US. Moreover, arguments of both the East and the West on the triangle of Sino-Russia-US are addressed in a more macro, general and summarized manner for a long period. In contrast, the thesis adopts four specific issues in a specific period to explore the interactions among the three actors within the triangle, which can give the new inspirations for and insights into a more concrete and vivid Sino-Russia-US triangle.

### **3. Problem Formulation**

*“What is the Triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration? And what are the characteristics of this Triangle? ”*

### **4. Methodology**

Stemming from the strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US, actually the topic about the triangle of Sino-Russia-US is not a strange one in the international relations. However, what makes the topic resilient and interesting is that the triangle is dynamic with interactions among the three countries, which means that the topic is of research value during the different period. Therefore, there has been a lot of researches and literature

done on the subject. Whereas, to some extent, it is still brand new to probe into the subject through specific international issues. In this way, a broad topic can be discussed in depth with microcosmic and concrete view, *multum in parvo*; however, the reading section is still demanding given the fact that the subject involves interactions among the three countries in terms of different perspectives.

## 4.1 Research Design

In order to address the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration, the thesis will approach it through two theoretical frameworks to sustain the paper. The theories are: Realism including the offensive realism and theory of triangle, Liberalism including economic interdependency theory and neo-liberal institutionalism.

The theoretical structure of the thesis depends on the respective elaboration on the original authors and concerned literature. Subsequently, the literature as follows is taken for reference to understand the theories of the thesis:

- *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) by John J. Mearsheimer probes into Offensive Realism.
- “The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis” (1981) by Lowell Dittmer probes into Theory of Triangle.
- *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (1984) by Robert O. Keohane probes into Neo-liberal Institutionalism.
- “Power, Interdependence and Conflict: What IR theories tell us about China’s rise” (2014) by J. R. Masterson probes into Economic Interdependency.

Utilizing these theories as lenses, the thesis will probe into the triangle of Sino-Russia-US under the second term of Obama administration through four issues/parameters, namely trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue. For each issue, analyses will be made to see how these three state

actors have been interacting among themselves. In other words, the thesis will analyze three bilateral relations under the issue, Sino-US interactions, Sino-Russia interactions and US-Russia interactions, thus coming to the conclusion that what kind of triangle it is against the specific issue according to Lowell Dittmer's theory of triangle. Finally, based on these parameters, the thesis can figure out what the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration is and what characteristics it has shown.

Overall, the four issues, from the perspective of trade and security, are chosen to portray a comprehensive picture of the triangle of Sino-Russia-US during that period, for the parameter of trade and counter-terrorism can reflect the Liberalism while the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue show Realism.

## **4.2 Sources**

Considering the subject on the triangle of Sino-Russia-US is not "newcomer" in the international relations, the literature is not limited. In order to have a good grasp of the origin, significance and development of the triangle of Sino-Russia-US, both foreign and domestic research articles serve as main sources. In order to understand the interactions among the three countries in the parameter of trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue, both foreign and domestic research articles and news review are retrieved. However, when it comes to literature on analyzing the triangle of Sino-Russia-US from the angle of specific international issues, there is still a lack of sources to some extent.

Therefore, the following sources establish the basis of literature for the thesis; however, the thesis is not confined to the sources as follows:

- Jia Chunyang, & ChenYu. (2015). Sino-US-Russia Relations in Light of Game Theory: Their Latest Trends and China's Planning Methods. *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs* (2).
- Kotkin Stephen. (2009, Sep. to Oct.). The Unbalanced Triangle: What Chinese-Russian Relations Mean for the United States .

Foreign Affairs.

- Lo Bobo. (2014, Feb.). Russia, China and the United States: From Strategic Triangularism to the Postmodern Triangle. *Russian Studies* (185).
- Wishnick Elizabeth. (2015, Dec. 16). The New China-Russia-U.S. Triangle. Retrieved: March 8, 2017 from The National Bureau of Asian Research: [http://www.nbr.org/publications/nbranalysis/pdf/brief/121615\\_Wishnick\\_ChinaRussiaUS.pdf](http://www.nbr.org/publications/nbranalysis/pdf/brief/121615_Wishnick_ChinaRussiaUS.pdf)
- Shi Ze. (2016). The Current Situation and Trend of China-Russia-U.S. Triangle. *Peace and Development* (3).
- Yu Zhengliang, & Li Xiaoyi. (2015, 11). New Situations of China-Russia-U.S. Strategic Relations. *Forum of World Economics & Politics* (6).

The sources listed above focus on development of Sino-Russia-US triangle, analyzing the performances and causes of the three bilateral relations. However, they mostly adopt a macroscopic point to demonstrate three bilateral relations on the basis of developmental trend rather than conduct analyses in terms of specific international issues. Besides, though not listed above, there should be extensive sources about interactions among the three countries in the parameter of trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue, such as research papers and related news report. To sum up, in the thesis, research articles, news review, the second-hand literature and other different sources are to be used.

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

### **5.1 Realism**

The section of Realism will account for two parts: offensive realism by Mearsheimer and theory of triangle by Dittmer. The former gives an explanation on

the competition and confrontation between powers. The latter lays foundations for types and features of the triangle relations.

### **5.1.1 Offensive Realism**

In contrast to optimists of liberalists, realists are recognized as pessimists for they argue that the world is characterized by security contests and conflicts and the eternal peace among great powers cannot come into reality (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 2). More than fifty years ago, Hans Morgenthau came up with Realism, which has developed to one of classic and fundamental theoretical methods in the studies of international relations (Snyder, 2002, p. 149).

From the perspective of a chronological overview, two realist theories come to prominence: human nature realism and defensive realism. The former, called classical realism as well, was put forward by Morgenthau in his *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* and means that states never stop utilizing opportunities to achieve dominance over other states in an offensive way. The latter, also known as structural realism, was come up with by Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* by Waltz and argues that states are cautious towards other powers and strive to secure its survival out of the presence of an anarchical international system instead of primitively aggressive human nature. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 18-19).

Then, John J. Mearsheimer, an American political scientist, made contribution to the development of international relations theories and put forward offensive realism. In his *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer explains that the final goal of states is to develop to the hegemon and states will persistently endeavor to strengthen its national power in the world at the sacrifice of other powers (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 11). While human nature realism attaches importance to the inherent human will to pursue dominance over others, Mearsheimer holds the view that states' constant desire for power should be attributed to its self-expectation to assure the security in an anarchic international system (Snyder, 2002, p. 151). As for the difference between defensive realism and offensive realism, they both put



emphasis on the factor of power for states' survival in an anarchical international system, but they differ in to what extent states should pursue power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21). Mearsheimer gives elaborations on the point concisely. According to Mearsheimer, on the basis of defensive realism, states are more inclined to maintain the status quo and preserve the current balance of power instead of seeking changes and increasing its own strength. On the basis of offensive realism, states in an anarchical international system keep in mind that they should grasp opportunities to gain power at the sacrifice of other powers, for there does not exist status quo powers and the benefits brought form their move to maximize their own power outweigh the costs. In other words, different from the defensive realists as power conservatives, offensive realists advance towards the goal of power maximization and system hegemon. (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21).

However, Mearsheimer also explains that to be a regional hegemon rather than a global hegemon should be a more practical and anticipated goal for powers due to the existence of “stopping power of water”. In other words, the existence of water bodies can hinder states from developing to the global hegemon, because it is feasible to become the governor in the region where they are settled in. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 83-84) Evidently, a regional hegemon cannot endure peer rivals in its region, for it can pose a threat to its dominant position and security. If it happens, the regional hegemon will endeavor to repress or even destroy its rival. However, it will please a regional hegemon if there exists at least two local powers in other regions, for they will keep an eye on each other within that region instead of posing a threat to a regional hegemon in the other region. Specifically, if the distant hegemon discovers that there appears a potential regional power in the other region that cannot be restrained by the existing local powers, the distant power can play the role of “offshore balancer” and take measures to deal with the situation. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 41-42).

To sum up, Mearsheimer's offensive realism can help analyze the interactions in the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the context of China's remarkable economic growth and its rapid rise into a threatening “potential regional hegemon” from the perspective

of the US and Russia's tough diplomacy towards Europe serving as a challenge to the US.

### **5.1.2 Theory of Triangle**

Since 1970s, "strategic triangle" as the concept of international relations has come upon stage. The US scholar, Lowell Dittmer, put forward the notion of strategic triangle in his "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis". A strategic triangle indicates complicated interactions among three actors (Dittmer, 1981, p. 485). It first has been applied in the classical strategic triangle of China, the US and SU in the late part of the Cold War—a competitive geopolitical strategic triangle of Sino-SU-US.

From the perspective of Dittmer, a strategic triangle must meet two objective conditions. In the first place, all actors within the triangle should realize the influence and prominence of the triangle, which means that each actor can have their own side interactions but this kind of interactions should be attached to the core game in the triangle. In the second place, there is no need for the three actors in the triangle to embrace the same strategic power and strength, but each member should serve as a "legitimate" and "autonomous" player ratified by the other two players of the triangle. Furthermore, in the strategic triangle, each actor's relations and interactions with any of the other two actors can impose impact on the interactions between the other two actors. (Dittmer, 1981, pp. 490-491)

As for the fundamental types, Dittmer argues that the interactions among three players can be classified into two types, a competitive one and a cooperative one. The former includes romantic triangle, stable marriage and unit-veto. The latter refers to *ménage à trios*. Respectively, romantic triangle is composed of one "pivot" actor and two "wing" actors, with goodwill between "pivot" and each "wing" and hostility within "wing actors". Stable marriage includes a pariah and two partners, with amity between two partners and enmity between each partner and the pariah. Unit-veto refers to negative interactions among all three participants while *ménage à trios*

means positive relations among all three players. The four types can be shown as follows:

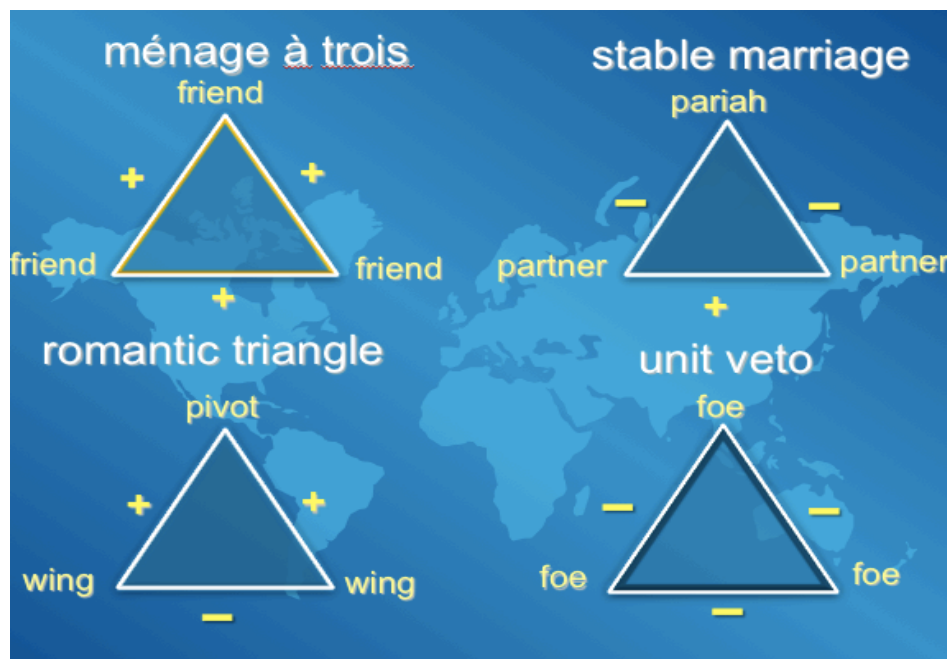


Figure 1 Source: (Chinglee, 2016)

As for stable marriage, Dittmer holds the view that the pariah is least advantageous because the player is frozen out of amities with either of the others and must cope with two enmities. It is a position that requires greater economic self-reliance and a heavy investment in armaments in order to equal or deter the combined military strength of both other players. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 508) In this case, a rational strategy for the pariah is to establish a cluster of patron-client ties with smaller states with the purpose of constituting a bloc strong and cohesive enough to counter the combined strength of the other two players (Dittmer, 1981, p. 509).

From the perspective of Dittmer, the pariah must shoulder a heavier defense burden than the other members of the triangle in order to maintain a strategic balance. Besides, the pariah should also try not to provoke the other two partners, not only because the two-to-one power unbalance but also because the pariah's ultimate objective is to obtain the most susceptible member of the stable marriage, thus disintegrating the opposing combination and paving the path for self-benefit. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 509) Whereas, what the role of partner in the stable marriage should perform

are two different but interdependent tasks. Dittmer argues that they should retain its partner's loyalty and maintain a little enmity with its opponent for the partnership still has the risk of cheating or a double-cross. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 510) In order to retain a partner's loyalty, firstly, no asymmetry of bilateral relations should be ensured, however, there does not exist "balance of trade" in such relations. The evaluation of symmetry remains subjective and political, but what counts the most is that neither side feels cheated. Secondly, it can serve a possible way to enhance loyalty by increasing tension with the mutual opponent. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 510) There are two points in maintaining a moderate enmity with their opponent. On the one hand, sufficient tension is required to retain a stable marriage; on the other hand, it is sensible not to raise the tension too high, thus avoiding the costs of an arms race and the risk of ill-considered measures from the opponent. Specifically, if a senior partner in a stable marriage can make some sort of compromise with the pariah without alienating the junior partner, the pattern can be transformed into a romantic triangle with the senior partner as pivot. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 510)

As for romantic triangle, in the opinion of Dittmer, the pivot position is the most advantageous, which means that it can permit amities with two wings and enmities with none to maximize benefits and minimize costs for sanctions. However, the risk of double-cross is twice that of a stable marriage. The pivot position is not an easy task to play well since it requires great delicacy and balance. According to Dittmer, the pivot needs to maintain positive relations with both wing players while endeavoring to control the level of tension between them. (Dittmer, 1981, p. 510) Moreover, Dittmer claims that to achieve positive relations with both wing players, the pivot should be cautious not only about pivot-wing relations but also about wing-wing relations. Whereas, it is basically impossible for the pivot to keep completely even-handed in coping with the two wing players, given the fact that they have different interests, bargaining strategies, capabilities and offers. Nevertheless, Dittmer concludes that the key point for maintaining a romantic triangle is to convince each wing player that the pivot and the other wing player do not share antagonism, and that the pivot should be as fair as possible with each wing player.

(Dittmer, 1981, pp. 510-511)

To sum up, theoretically, strategic triangles embrace three interdependently bilateral relations, where each bilateral relation can impose impact on the other two. In other words, the “triangularity” is a condition featured with leverage. From the perspective of the individual actor in the triangle, on the premise of securing and maximizing its own security, it is best for it to maintain positive relations with the other two actors while it is worst for it to keep negative relations with them. (Chinglee, 2016) However, Dittmer holds the opinion that romantic triangle instead of *ménage à trois* is his personal favorite, since each player in *ménage à trois* still nurtures worries that the positive interactions between the other two players may not be in accord with its own interest, while the “pivot” in romantic triangle can play a dominant role in securing its own interest and promoting the enmity between the two “wing actors”. However, since World War II, “stable marriage” seems to be the norm while the *ménage à trois* has not yet evolved. (Chinglee, 2016)

Therefore, Theory of Triangle by Lowell Dittmer can serve as guidance for evaluating the interactions and relations among China, Russia and the US.

## **5.2 Liberalism**

This section will provide theoretical knowledge of two concepts about Liberalism in the international relations: economic interdependency theory and neo-liberal institutionalism. The concepts will give insights into economic interactions and cooperation between countries.

### **5.2.1 Neo-liberal Institutionalism**

Against the background of world politics characterized by an anarchical international system with competition, a different theoretical perspective called Institutionalism was put forward by Robert Keohane (Keohane, 1984, p. 7). Keohane believes that cooperation is possible despite the absence of a hegemonic power, because under conditions of similar interests states will engage in cooperation, and

institutions can meaningfully influence the way such cooperation between states can occur (Keohane, 1984, p. 9).

Cooperation indicates a process of negotiation that is called “policy coordination” by Keohane. “Policy coordination” means that though there is possibility for states to have clashes due to their different pursuit of self-interests, they can try to reach an agreement. Subsequently, in line with the argument of Keohane, by means of policy coordination, states can adapt their actions for the expected priorities of others, thus leading to the occurrence of cooperation (Keohane, 1984, pp. 51-52). Keohane explains that cooperation between states is not because of a lack of conflict in the world, but instead it is a reaction to conflict or probable conflict (Keohane, 1984, p. 54).

According to Keohane, international regime is another important concept. From the perspective of Keohane, international regime portrays “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures” to cater to the anticipations and demands of players in the international relations (Keohane, 1984, p. 57). The regime has to provide some space for the member states to acquire some extent of self-interest, or they would lack motivation to join in and maintain the regime.

Furthermore, Keohane holds the view that international regimes can serve as an effective platform for states to commit cooperation and negotiation on the basis of sharing information and cutting the transaction costs. Considering the uncertainty of breaking the rules of international regimes, such as damaged reputation and unexpected sanctions, states will be more prudent to violate the rules and can be more willing to obey the rules though it does not suit its interest to the best. (Keohane, 1984, p. 108).

As a result, Keohane’s neo-liberal institutionalism can give insights into the cooperation of big powers in the international community. It is a relevant theory for the thesis since it permits the analysis of the cooperation in some international issues among China, Russia and the US and interactions and coordination among the three countries in international institutions.

### 5.2.2 Economic Interdependency

Economic interdependency theory or economic liberalism focuses on economic interactions between states and how this interaction affects state behavior. Economic interdependency theory “(...) claims that economic interdependence reduces conflict primarily by increasing the costs of war” (Masterson, 2014, p. 10). An example of this was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. This treaty created economic interdependence between France and Germany to reduce the chance of a new war and keep stability in Europe. Economic liberalism emphasizes the importance of international trade, FDI and free trade to best accomplish economic growth.

In the light of economic interdependency, it can explain the economic interactions in the triangle of Sino-Russia-US. Taking Sino-US relations as an example, though both sides have disputes on some issues, such as the South China Sea issue, they still embrace powerful trade interactions, developing to the indispensable trade partner for the other side.

## 6. Empirical Analyses

### 6.1 Trade

Economic base determines the superstructure; therefore against the context of globalization, economic factors can play an important role in influencing the relations between state actors. Besides, economic communications serve as an inevitable way for country exchanges. Therefore, trade is considered as one of parameters to explore the triangle of Sino-Russia-US.

**Sino-US relations:** The second term of Obama administration has witnessed continuous progress of trade relations between China and the US, though problems still exist. Firstly, bilateral trade volume increased steadily. Based on China's official statistics, Sino-US bilateral trade volume reached \$558 billion. In 2014, China was

the US' second-largest trading partner, its third-largest export market and its largest source of imports (Morrison, 2015, p. 1). In 2015, according to the report of the US Department of Commerce, China overtook Canada to become the largest trading partner of the US for the first time. In turn, the US served as the second largest trading partner, the largest export market and the fourth largest source of imports for China at the end of Obama administration's second term (Yu X. , 2016, p. 40). According to the report from the US-China Business Council in Aug. 2016, the US' exports to China increased by 116% from 2006 to 2015, outweighing its 10 other major trading partners, which means that China acted as the "important contributor" for the US economic growth. Besides, the US Department of Commerce predicts that China will develop to the largest importer globally in 2022 when the US export volume to China will go over \$530 billion, thus generating over 3.34 million job opportunities. Secondly, direct investments rose dramatically. Based on statistics co-issued by National Committee on United States-China Relations and Rhodium Group, compared with \$3 billion in 2007, China's direct investment towards the US increased to \$62.9 billion in 2015, 20 times the amount of 2007 and covering various fields. Meanwhile, the US' direct investment towards China increased greatly as well. Compared with \$29.7 billion in 2007, the US' direct investment towards China amounted to almost \$77.5 billion in 2015, increasing by 160.8%. According to statistics published by Chinese Ministry of Commerce on Jan.28, 2016, the number of the US' investment projects in China amounted to 66,000 with nearly \$77.5 billion investment by the end of 2015, thus making the US the sixth largest source of foreign investment for China. (Yu X. , 2016, pp. 40-41) Thirdly, China developed to the largest holder of the US Treasury securities in the second term of Obama administration. Chinese mainland has surpassed Japan to become the largest foreign holder of the US Treasury securities since March 2015. In Feb. 2016, Chinese mainland and Hong Kong, China co-held the US Treasury securities of \$1.45 trillion, increased by 203% since 2007. (Yu X. , 2016, p. 41) Fourthly, remarkable results were achieved in the field of currency and financial cooperation. For one thing, the US reduced the disturbance of exchange rate for bilateral trade relations. For another,



China's discourse in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was improved. Due to Obama administration's work in lobbying the Congress, on Dec. 19, 2015, IMF made the final decision that China's voting share was raised from 3.7% to 6.1%, making China rank the third just behind the US and Japan, and agreed to bring Chinese Yuan (RMB) into special drawing right (SDR). (Yu X. , 2016, pp. 41-42)

However, problems within Sino-US bilateral trade relations should also be realized. The US always complained about China's high trade surplus. On the basis of statistics of the US Department of Commerce, China enjoyed a favorable balance of trade from \$226.8 billion in 2009 to \$365.7 billion in 2015, while the overall trade deficit of the US was \$531.5 billion in 2015. The figure 2 can show conditions of trade balance between China and the US as well. National Committee on United States-China Relations pointed out that the US merchandise only accounted for 6.5% of Chinese importing market, lagging behind European Union and South Korea. In addition, Obama administration has taken harsh measures in conducting anti-dumping and anti-subsidy investigations towards China by means of WTO dispute settlement mechanism. The statistics of United States International Trade Commission indicated that among the US' ongoing tariff collection orders of "double anti", China bore 132 of them with 99 anti-dumping cases and 33 anti-subsidy cases, whereas India, ranking the second, only embraced 23 of them.

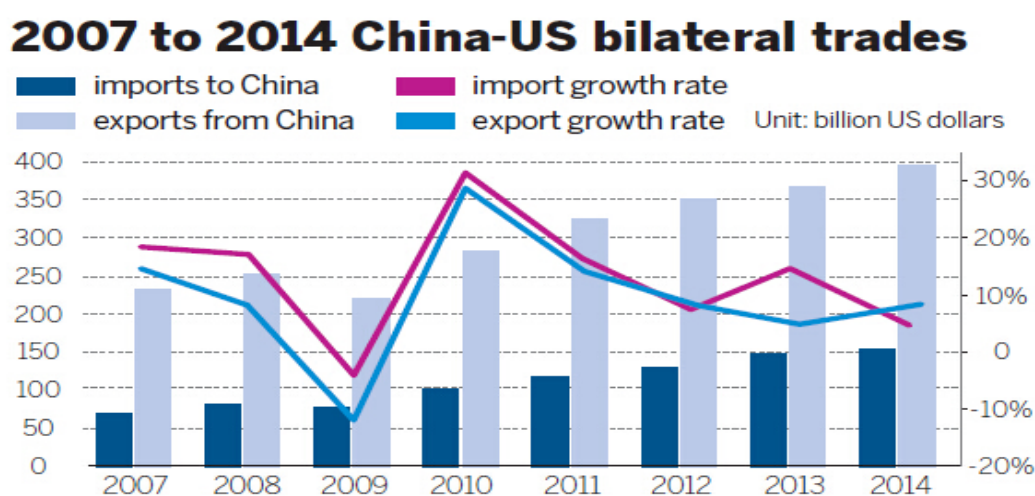


Figure 2 (Zhou, 2015)

As a whole, though problems exist, as the two largest economies, bilateral trade

relations between China and the US have maintained a good momentum in the second term of Obama administration. The fact should be realized that the economy of China and the US is mutual-beneficial and interdependent. During recent years, China has taken the initiative in adjusting its own growth mode, shifting from high economic growth to medium-high economic growth, from export-oriented economy to an economy boosted by expanding domestic demands. Actually, China's economic restructuring is complementary to the US' economic mode shift promoted by Obama administration. In order to correct an economy heavily dependent on credit consumption and financial service, Obama administration issued a series of measures to strengthen its real economy, such as developing the manufacturing industry and encouraging exports. In other words, China with greater domestic needs can benefit the US' exports and provide a potential market for the US' manufacturing industry. That is the reason why Sino-US trade relations can still keep an upward trend out of the stagnant global economic growth. (Yu X. , 2016, pp. 42-43) In conclusion, from the perspective of trade, Sino-US relations remain a positive one in the second term of Obama administration.

**Sino-Russia relations:** During Obama administration's second term, Sino-Russia relations were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation in 2014 and Sino-Russia trade experienced a healthy development. Since 2010, China has developed to be Russia's largest trade partner. In 2015, Russia fell to China's 16<sup>th</sup> largest trade partner from the 9<sup>th</sup> largest one compared with the last year. Actually, Sino-Russia trade has enjoyed great potential. From 2002 to 2014, the bilateral trade volume increased from \$12 billion to \$95 billion while in 2015, due to sluggish global demand and a crude oil price plunge, the Sino-Russia bilateral trade volume was \$68 billion decreasing by 28.6% compared with the same period of last year (Huang, 2016, p. 27). However, both sides have endeavored to boost their bilateral trade, with Sino-Russia trade stopping decreasing in the first half of 2016 and achieved a total \$31.7 billion, 1.8% increases over the same period of last year (Xinhua, 2016). Besides, the top leaders are also confident in the future. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Putin claimed to boost trade

volume to \$200 billion by 2020. Two economies are complementary, which means that China's exports to Russia are labor-intensive light industrial products to meet the domestic need of Russia, and its imports from Russia are resource products to strengthen China's energy security. In addition, Russia has joined the AIIB and played a high value on "The Belt and Road" initiative by China with the purpose of generating good chemistry between "The Belt and Road" and Eurasian Economic Union.

Nevertheless, in contrast to Sino-US bilateral trade relations, Sino-Russia trade relations are laggard. For instance, in 2013, Sino-Russia bilateral trade volume reached almost \$89 billion compared with \$520 billion of Sino-US trade volume, \$443 billion of Sino-ASEAN trade volume. The fact should be realized that Sino-US bilateral trade volume is not tantamount to the status of two powers. Moreover, some problems exist to place restrictions on Sino-Russia trade development, such as defective bilateral trade system, imperfect bilateral trade service system and single commodity composition which means that products of both sides are low in technology content and high-tech, high value-added products account for a low proportion (Huang, 2016, p. 27).

To sum up, Sino-Russia trade embraces great potential though it has weaknesses as well. Actually, China and Russia have had a long history of cooperation in energy, industry, investment and trade settlement and there will be more opportunities for Sino-Russia trade cooperation with the development of China's "The Belt and Road" initiatives (Xinhua, 2016). In conclusion, from the perspective of trade, China and Russia remain a positive trade relation in the second term of Obama administration.

**US-Russia relations:** Compared with Sino-US and Sino-Russia bilateral trade relations, US-Russia trade relations were not as bright as those ones during Obama administration's second term. Actually, US-Russia bilateral trade relations looked promising at the beginning of Obama administration's second term, for at the eve of Obama's second term, Russia finally managed to be an official member of WTO in August 2012 and House of Representatives of the US approved Russia Trade Bill to recover the normal Sino-Russia trade relations in Nov. 2012. However, with the

outburst of Crimea crises and following economic sanctions by the US, US-Russia relations were directly worsened. For example, according to the statistics of the US Department of Commerce, the US' exports to Russia during the first five months in 2015 reduced by 34% with \$3.3 billion compared with the same period of last year with \$5.1 billion. At the same time, Russian exports to the US reduced by \$3.5 billion compared with the same period of last year. Besides, objectively, the trade demands between Russia and the US are not of complementary feature, which can also hinder the further development of their bilateral trade.

Therefore, due to political barriers and conflicts of geopolitical interests around Europe and East Asia, Sino-Russia bilateral trade relations are a negative one in the second term of Obama administration.

**Conclusion:** as mentioned above, in the second term of Obama administration, Sino-US bilateral trade relations were the most prosperous and of strong momentum since both sides are economically interdependent; Sino-Russia bilateral trade relations were the most potential since both sides were determined to boost further cooperation; while US-Russia bilateral trade relations were retrogressive since their upgrading political disputes. The former two can be the reflection of economic interdependency, and Sino-Russia trade relations especially can represent the neo-liberal institutionalism since both sides can utilize the platform of AIIB to alleviate the constraints in their regional cooperation. In the long run, there is much prospect for the trade interactions among the three state actors, for the three states have all been the member of WTO and can operate within the same international framework to facilitate their trade cooperation, which illustrates the neo-liberal institutionalism as well. From the perspective of trade, it seems that the triangle of Sino-Russia-US belongs to the type of “romantic triangle” with China serving as the pivot position.

## 6.2 Counter-terrorism

In the parameter of counter-terrorism, historically speaking, there were not many positive interactions among the triangle of Sino-Russia-US, for the US conducted

“double standards” towards terrorism on the basis of “Cold War” mentality. The US accused Russia of violating human rights in Chechnya, which provoked Russia’s anti-American sentiment. The US condemned China in its *Human Rights Report* for several times, specifically towards Xinjiang problems, which cast a shadow for Sino-US relations. At that time, groundless accusations against China and Russia were rooted in its “Cold War” mentality rather than inadequate awareness of terrorism. Actually, the US became the main target of global terrorism with the end of the Cold War, thus leading to its harsh crackdowns on its either domestic or overseas terrorism. The reason why the US interfered with the counter-terrorism of China and Russia was that based on “Cold War” mentality, the US adhered to containment strategy towards the two countries with the purpose of utilizing terrorism to westernize and weaken China and Russia instead of being concerned about their human rights conditions. (Ma, 2005, p. 53)

However, the situation has changed since 9/11 attacks. 9/11 attacks shocked the US and the world to reevaluate the global terrorism, which created a new platform to improve Sino-US and Sino-Russia relations in the parameter of counter-terrorism. After 9/11 attacks, Russian President Putin expressed that Russia would give full support to the US’ counter-terrorism campaign and he urged central-Asian countries to support the US’ anti-terror activities by means of Russia’s influence in central-Asia (Ma, 2005, p. 53). Chinese President Jiang Zemin strongly condemned the attacks and expressed his sympathy to the American people. China agreed to cooperate with the US during its attacks on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Conversely, the US officially recognized East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and three illegal armed groups of Chechnya as terrorist organizations in 2004.

In the second term of Obama administration, the global counter-terrorism campaign was confronted with severer challenges with the appearance of ISIS. From Paris terror attack on Nov. 13, 2015, Brussels terror attack on March 22, 2016 to Nice terror attack on July 14, 2016, terrorism was rampant, which aroused more global attention to attach importance to the global anti-terror cooperation. Under the circumstance, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US could embrace more cooperative

interactions in the parameter of counter-terrorism.

**Sino-US relations:** In the second term of Obama administration, China and the US held vice-ministerial anti-terror dialogues to boost bilateral cooperation on fighting terrorism. The consensus has been reached by China and the US that both sides should utilize valid platforms to strengthen cooperation and attack terrorism in dealing with the serious terrorism threats (Chen, 2014).

However, China has clearly expressed that China objects to “double standards” in the issue of counter-terrorism, which always disturbs China (Chen, 2014). From the perspective of China, terrorism in any form and terrorist acts carried out or supported by any person under any name are firmly opposed and condemned (Xinhuanet, 2014). In other words, every country should adopt a unanimous attitude and a sole standard in fighting terrorism, which means that any kind of terrorism should be firmly combated. Whereas, the terrorism the US opposes mainly focuses on the type whose target is the US and its allies. As long as the terrorism does not take the US as its attack target, the US will not oppose it positively or even will give secret support to and make use of it. (Ma, 2005, p. 54) Consequently, though the US has expressed understandings about China’s concerns on fighting ETIM, the US has ever shown negative attitude to oppose the terrorist activities implemented by ETIM in China, which disappoints China (Chen, 2014). Besides, after 9/11 attacks, China actually has been supportive and cooperative in the efforts of the US to fight terrorism, while the US has kept a low profile in recognizing it. For instance, according to country reports released by the US State Department in 2014, the US defined China’s collaboration and participation in 2013 with the US on the matter of anti-terrorist activities as “remained marginal”, which triggered China’s dissatisfaction (Xinhuanet, 2014).

As a result, China and the US have reached consensus that as the commonly threatening enemy of mankind, terrorism should be attached importance to and be jointly combated by the international community (Xinhuanet, 2014). Both sides share common interest in counter-terrorism and agree to utilize the established bilateral mechanism to boost further cooperation in fighting terrorism. Therefore, in the second term of Obama administration, Sino-US relations showed a positive tendency in the

parameter of counter-terrorism.

**Sino-Russia relations:** In the parameter of counter-terrorism, Sino-Russia relations seem to embrace a bright future. In the second term of Obama administration, both sides regularly held joint anti-terror drills. Besides, in the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Putin held a meeting that mainly aimed at the responses to the terrorist activities resulted from extreme Islam, the ISIS in particular. Both China and Russia have come to realize that the global counter-terrorism situation has witnessed great changes and China vowed to enhance cooperation with Russia against terrorism. (Martel, 2015)

The cooperative situation in fighting terrorism between China and Russia can be attributed to their common standard and national interest. As for the standard of terrorism, in contrast to the US, both China and Russia stick to the same principle that “terrorism in any form and terrorist activities implemented or supported by any person under any name” should be firmly combated (Xinhuanet, 2014). Both sides attach importance to the dominant position of the United Nations (UN) in fighting terrorism. Moreover, the terrorist threat disturbing China and Russia comes from inside, which means that both countries’ firm determination to crack down on terrorism is for the purpose of stabilizing the country, maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity, preserving the world peace and promoting the common development. (Ma, 2005, p. 54) As for the national interest, China and Russia can give each other mutual support in combating Chechnya and ETIM. Besides, geopolitically, they share common terrorist threat from middle-Asia, which is conducive to their cooperation in fighting terrorism.

Subsequently, on the basis of common standard and national interest, China and Russia showed a stable cooperation in fighting terrorism in the second term of Obama administration and both sides will embrace an enhanced cooperation in the future.

**US-Russia relations:** In the parameter of counter-terrorism, US-Russia relations should be the most intriguing one among three bilateral relations of the triangle in the second term of Obama administration. Actually, due to Ukraine crises, Russia’s relations with the US and Europe deteriorated, however, the growing and expanding

ISIS has turned the table. Claiming responsibility for Paris terror attack on Nov. 13, 2015, crash of a Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Brussels terror attack on March 22, 2016, and Nice terror attack on July 14, 2016, ISIS has posed immeasurable threat to the world peace and aroused anxiety and indignation in the international community (Yu S. , 2015). The worsening global security condition has urged the US and Russia, two countries holding the biggest arsenals in the world, to realize the significance of cooperation in fighting terrorism and has paved the way for their bilateral anti-terror joint efforts. In fact, after the Paris terror attack, Russia at first time was calling for the establishment of an anti-terror international alliance led by the UN and expressed wishes for cooperation with the US in combating ISIS. Previously, in Sept. 2015, Obama and his counterpart Putin had reached consensus on coordinating their actions in fighting ISIS. (Yu S. , 2015) Therefore, positive signals of anti-terror cooperation between Russia and the US were released in the second term of Obama administration.

Nevertheless, Russia-US relations of cooperation in anti-terror actions are delicate, for there mainly exists three hurdles. Firstly, it is the same as that of Sino-US relations—"double standards". The US' anti-terrorism is for the purpose of eliminating terrorist threats to its own and allies, thus establishing the US-dominated international order. Given the fact that Russia argues that any terrorism should be eradicated, this kind of "selective" anti-terrorism can be a hindrance for Russia-US further anti-terror cooperation. Secondly, Russia and the US hold completely different attitudes towards Bashar al-Assad. If fighting terrorism and overthrowing Bashar al-Assad regime are mixed together, it can be tricky for Russia and the US to cooperate in fighting terrorism, especially for the terrorism in Syria. Thirdly, in the parameter of counter-terrorism, the geopolitical game of Russia and the US still continues. After Ukrainian crises, Russia has been subjected to severe sanctions by Western countries, which was caught in a weak diplomatic position. However, Russia's decisive and effective anti-terror air raids in Syria have won the favor of the Europe to some extent, for it is helping curb the severe terrorism and refugee waves in the western European countries. (Yu S. , 2015) Considering that Europe is the



important ally of the US, the eased relations between Russia and Europe and Russia's return to stage of international diplomacy can weaken the US' dominant position in NATO, which is not welcomed by the US. Besides, Russia's swift strikes in Syria has helped itself strengthen its influence in the Middle-East as well, which cannot be accepted by the US in charge of Middle-East affairs all the time. Consequently, the US has ever been ambiguous about Russia's proposal of the establishment of anti-terror international alliance, for its positive response is tantamount to admitting Russia's vital role in fighting global terrorism and its own inaction. (Yang & Yin, 2015)

To sum up, compared with the past, Russia-US relations of anti-terror cooperation showed more motivations in the second term of Obama administration. For one thing, Russia has expressed its sincerity to cooperate with the US to fight ISIS; for another, the US has indicated that Russia serves as an important partner for the US in dealing with Iran nuclear issue, Middle-East affairs and global counter-terrorism campaign. Nonetheless, their interactions in the parameter of counter-terrorism have been of uncertainties due to "double standards" and their game of geopolitical interests.

**Conclusion:** In the second term of Obama administration, three bilateral relations in the parameter of counter-terrorism actually showed positive tendencies, which demonstrates the neo-liberal institutionalism, for their uniform condemning attitude towards the global terrorism actually adheres to that of the UN, which means that the UN can function as the international institution for the three states to seek common ground in launching anti-terror cooperation as far as possible. Among them, Sino-Russia relations are the most stable one while Sino-US and Russia-US relations cannot exclude uncertainties, for the US still has "Cold War" mentality and "double standards". The subtle attitude of the US towards China and Russia in the anti-terror issue can be attributed to the offensive realism thoughts born by the US, since it always worries that China and Russia's positive actions towards the global terrorism can restrain the influence and dominance of the US in the Asia-Pacific region or globally. In other words, the US attitude towards anti-terror cooperation with China

and Russia can play a crucial role in determining that the triangle of Sino-Russia-US belongs to “ménage a trios” or “stable marriage” in the parameter of counter-terrorism. Anyway, terrorism is the common enemy of the world. Big powers should adopt “unanimous standard”, bear in mind the logic of “cooperation brings to both sides while confrontation only results in harms for both” and strengthen mutual understanding and trust in carrying out anti-terror cooperation.

### 6.3 The South China Sea Issue

**Sino-US relations:** For a long period, the core of the South China Sea issue lies in disputes between China and its neighboring countries around the territorial sovereignty and maritime rights of Nansha Islands when the US held no position. However, after Obama came into office, the US’ “Asia Pacific Rebalancing Strategy” changed the situation. The strategy indicates that the intervention of the US has altered the essence of the South China Sea issue, which means that disputes of island’s sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction are intertwined with the game of maritime strategy of big powers and the South China Sea issue can be utilized by the US as the platform to conduct its “pivot to Asia” strategy. (An, 2016, p. 20)

Especially in the second term of Obama administration, the US was still determined to conduct the “pivot to Asia” strategy, which triggered the Sino-US confrontation on the South China Sea issue. In November 2013, China declared air defense identification zone in the East China Sea while the US refused to recognize it and stirred up the Philippines and Vietnam’s discontent with China by means of generating opinion that China will make air defense identification zone in the South China Sea. (An, 2016, p. 20) Since the end of 2013, China has launched the construction work in disputed waters to reclaim land and by the beginning of 2016, China had strengthened its control over the South China Sea area. Whereas, when Obama addressed the speech of maintaining the global leadership of the US at West Point on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014, he mentioned China for four times, accusing China of inflaming regional tensions by South China Sea issue and claiming that the US had be

prepared to react to China's "act of aggression" in the South China Sea. (An, 2016, p. 20) Actually, the US has ever utilized "freedom of navigation" to criticize China's land reclamation and construction projects on several reefs (BBC News, 2015). Moreover, the US conducted "routine operations in the South China Sea" around the Nansha Islands in October 2015. The US said its action was in accordance with international law while China claimed it was illegal. (BBC News, 2015) Besides, supported by the US, Benigno Aquino III, the president of the Philippines, submitted the disputes of the South China Sea to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague in 2013. Impacted by the US, in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague made a ruling that China has no historic rights to its claimed "nine-dash line", which was rejected by China totally.

Subsequently, the game of China and the US over the South China Sea had developed to a kind of regional confrontation in the second term of Obama administration. For one thing, due to interests of energy resources, the South China Sea area is of strategic importance, which appeals to big powers; for another, with the rise of China, the US takes South China Sea issue as the stage of its rebalance strategy, with the purpose of containing China and maintaining its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, from the parameter of the South China Sea issue, the Sino-US relations are not an optimistic one.

**Sino-Russia relations:** As a whole, Russia has not taken a stand on the South China Sea disputes; however, this does not mean that Sino-Russia relations in the parameter of the South China Sea issue are a negative one. In fact, based on mutual understandings, what both sides have behaved is in accordance with their own national interests, thus leading to a healthy and normal Sino-Russia relation in the parameter of the South China Sea issue.

In 2014, tensions over maritime disputes in the South China Sea escalated, for China and Vietnam had conflicts over an oil drilling platform near Xisha Islands and the Philippines' detention of Chinese fishermen worsened bilateral relations. Under the circumstances, the US criticized China, supported Vietnam and shielded the Philippine military, while Russia had never publicly expressed support for China.

There are voices that Sino-Russia relations are not as good as expected, however, Russia's stance conforms to its own national interests and can acquire China's understanding as well. (Mu, 2014) There are four political and strategic factors for Russia's ambiguous position. Firstly, the Sino-Russia relations are comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, which means that they are not allies bound by alliance treaty to defend each other's international space and national interests, while there are security treaties between the US and the Philippines. In other words, China and Russia can conduct independent policies that should be respected by each other. Moreover, since Russia does not consider the South China Sea as an area to strive for its own interests, Russia's attitude and reaction towards the issue is understandable. (Mu, 2014) Secondly, Russia embraces good relations with many of Southeast Asian countries. Thirdly, it is not for Russia's interest to get involved in a direct confrontation with the US over the South China Sea disputes, given the fact that relations between Russia and the West had worsened owing to the Ukraine crises. Fourthly, China's rise has disturbed Russia for China's development may influence the Far East interests of Russia; therefore China can be hindered from stretching into other regions owing to disputes between China and other South China Sea countries. (Mu, 2014)

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Russia has negative relations with China over the South China Sea issue. Actually, Sino-Russia relations have formed solid foundation for mutual understanding over decades of years. For instance, on the Crimea question, instead of openly backing up Russia, China's stance was to abstain from the UN Security Council vote, which does not indicate that China is antagonistic to Russia. Similarly, though Russia chose to keep a neutral position towards the South China Sea issue, it is not tantamount to Russia's opposition to China. Russia has its own ways to show support to China. (Mu, 2014) For example, in May 2016, in the third Russia-ASEAN summit in Sochi, President Putin appealed Southeast Asian countries to pass the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, which echoed China's measures to deal with relations with other South China Sea countries. In July 2016, Russia held joint military drills with China in the South China Sea, which could help

reduce China's pressure and balance the US power over the South China Sea disputes (BBC News, 2016).

Therefore, in the second term of Obama administration, Sino-Russia relations over the South China Sea issue remained a normal and reasonable one, though Russia held neutral stance. China and Russia grant each other enough room for respective ambiguous policies and maneuvering space to strive for their own national interests, which demonstrates a virtuous partnership (Mu, 2014).

**Russia-US relations:** Seemingly, China and the US are directly closed to the South China Sea issue, which means that Russia-US relations have nothing to do with the disputes in the triangle. However, under the surface, there still exists game between Russia and the US in the parameter of the South China Sea issue. From the perspective of Russia, on the one hand, the US' containment of China over the South China Sea disputes can relieve its unrest for China's rapid rise and larger influence on Northeast Asia to some extent; on the other hand, Russia still needs China to balance the US power in the Asia-Pacific region especially after the Ukraine crises. From the perspective of the US, on the one hand, the US aims to utilize the South China Sea issue to conduct its "pivot to Asia" strategy and restrain China to regain its dominance in the Asia-Pacific region; on the other hand, the US does not want to result in intimacy between China and Russia over the South China Sea disputes. Therefore, Russia-US relations in the parameter of the South China Sea issue can be a subtle one, which should not be ignored.

**Conclusion:** In the second term of Obama administration, three bilateral relations of the triangle of Sino-Russia-US revealed either conspicuous negative relations or the potential of positive relations in the parameter of the South China Sea issue. The Sino-US relations over the South China Sea issue developed to a regional confrontation, which are clashes of national interests between China and the US in the specific region, thus illustrating the offensive realism, while the Sino-Russia relations and Russia-US relations do not exclude the possibility of coordination, which nurtures the potential of neo-liberal institutionalism. Especially, Russia has played an important and delicate role in impacting the tendency of the triangle over the South

China Sea disputes, for Russia's clear stance on any side of China and the US can leave the remainder pariah of the "stable marriage". Given the fact that Russia has remained a neutral stance towards the South China Sea disputes compared with the clear opposition between China and the US, I would like to say that Russia has embraced the potential of positive relations with both China and the US in the parameter of the South China Sea issue, thus leading to its pivot role in the triangle during that period. In other words, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration was inclined to be the type of romantic triangle and does not rule out the possibility of the shift to the type of stable marriage in the future.

#### **6.4 The THAAD Issue**

In the second term of Obama administration, in February, 2016, the US and Republic of Korea (ROK) began negotiations on the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) in the ROK, which gave rise to the oppositions of China and Russia initially (Xinhuanet, 2016). On July 8th, 2016, the ROK and the US expressed clearly that they had made up their mind to deploy THAAD in the ROK regardless of oppositions from relevant countries (Mo, 2016). What is THAAD? According to CNN news, THAAD system is devised to attack and intercept short, medium and intermediate ballistic missiles. It is composed of five principal components: interceptors, launchers, a radar, a fire control unit and support equipment. (Griffiths & Berlinger, 2016) As for its work process, first, the radar detects an incoming threat; second, the target is identified; third, the interceptor is fired from truck-mounted launcher; fourthly, the interceptor uses kinetic energy to destroy incoming missiles. (Griffiths & Berlinger, 2016) With the announcement of the deployment of THAAD by the ROK and the US, not only Korean Peninsula but also the regional stability situation has become more complicated, which can evidently impose impact on the triangle of Sino-Russia-US.

**Sino-US relations:** According to CNN news, the US has always held the opinion that THAAD serves as a merely defensive weapon which is able to attack and

intercept a ballistic missile to protect the US and its allies and the deployment in the ROK instead of other places points at threats from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) (Griffiths & Berlinger, 2016). However, from the perspective of China, THAAD can destabilize the region of Northeast Asia, which has aroused China's vehement opposition from the beginning. The range of THAAD to detect threats can reach as far as 2,000 km while Seoul is only about 200 km from Pyongyang, which indicates that THAAD is to perceive nuclear menaces from the DPRK what cannon is to kill a mosquito, according to the Chinese media. (Zhu, 2016) More importantly, THAAD can make any missile tests carried out by China in Northeast, North or East China under the US surveillance and grants the US advantage to oversee the military activities conducted by China and Russia. (Zhu, 2016) Therefore, according to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, THAAD can impose direct and negative impact on the strategic security interests of China and relative Asian countries. After the announcement of decision to deploy THAAD in the ROK by the ROK and the US, China said that it would consider taking necessary measures to safeguard its national security and regional balance (Mo, 2016).

Actually, if the US moves ahead with its THAAD, the DPRK will embrace more determination to develop nuclear weapons and conduct nuclear tests, which will tighten the nerve of the ROK and China (Zhu, 2016). Besides, given the fact that China supported the sanctions against the DPRK for its pursuing nuclear weapons and strived to restart the negotiation mechanism to establish peace of Northeast Asia, the THAAD move can make China fall into a passive position in the issue of Korea Peninsula. (Zhu, 2016) Moreover, the THAAD issue can hit China-ROK relations, which were embracing their best period in the second term of Obama administration since they established diplomatic ties with each other in 1992, with China serving as ROK's largest trade partner and the ROK playing the role of China's third-largest trade partner. (Zhu, 2016) Moreover, China and the ROK jointly oppose the efforts of Japanese politicians to whitewash Japan's World War II crimes. (Zhu, 2016)

As a result, though the US has insisted that the deployment of THAAD is for the purpose of protecting itself and its allies from the nuclear threats from the DPRK,

China has argued that the THAAD move serves the US' "pivot to Asia" strategy to escalate the US' presence in the Asia-Pacific region and contain China's rise, thus resulting in the threat to China's national security interests, a passive position of China on the Korean Peninsula issue and China's tensions with the ROK. Therefore, in the second term of Obama administration, there exist direct interest clashes in the parameter of the THAAD issue between China and the US, which leads to negative Sino-US relations.

**Sino-Russia relations:** In the second term of Obama administration, China and Russia stood together to respond to THAAD. Though it seemed that Russia did not show the same strong and apparent attitude as that of China towards THAAD at the initial stage, it still regards THAAD deployment as a security threat and a move to disrupt global strategic balance and regional security. Though not as large as that of China, the THAAD system can still peer into part of Russia's territory, allowing the US' surveillance on the military activities of Russia.

As for the joint responses of China and Russia, during the discussion period of the THAAD system, both countries expressed opposition and urged the ROK and the US to abandon the proposed deployment. Besides, in order to facilitate both military forces to have acquaintance with the order structures and data transfer processes of the other side, China and Russia held the joint anti-missile drills at a Russia military research center in May, 2016. (Hayward, 2016) The joint exercise functioned as a warning to the proposed deployment of THAAD and indicated the beginning of Sino-Russia's military cooperation in response to the THAAD move. (Hayward, 2016) After the announcement of the deployment of THAAD by the ROK and the US, China and Russia jointly condemned the move. In the Seventh Xiangshan Forum in Beijing in October 2016, both countries expressed a common stance on the THAAD system, which meant that China and Russia would keep a close eye on the developments of the THAAD deployment and develop mutual trust for further cooperation in responding the THAAD issue. (Global Times, 2016) In the Forum, Victor Poznihir, a top Russian military officer, expressed that the deployment of THAAD by the US aimed at containing Russian and Chinese strategic nuclear



capabilities and heightening the hegemony of the US. Moreover, in the Forum, China also declared that the second counter-missile drills between China and Russia would be held in 2017. (Global Times, 2016)

Therefore, in the second term of Obama administration, standing together, China and Russia enjoyed a positively cooperative relation in responding to the THAAD issue. Given the fact that the deployment of THAAD has been accelerated after Trump's assumption of duty and Park Geun-hye's scandal, China and Russia have issued a statement saying that both sides have agreed further unspecified countermeasures to cope with the THAAD system and safeguard interests of China and Russia in January, 2017. Subsequently, the cooperative Sino-Russia relations in the parameter of the THAAD issue are bound to be strengthened in the future.

**Russia-US relations:** In the parameter of the THAAD issue, Russia has held the same stance with China that the THAAD deployment is a security threat and voiced objections to the US' move. Russia has regarded the anti-missile system in the ROK as a disrupting force to the global security environment and regional strategic balance, and a hindrance to the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation process (Global Times, 2016). Furthermore, though the US has claimed that the necessity of THAAD is to protect the ROK from the DPRK's missiles, Russia has argued that the THAAD system aims to impair Russia's nuclear deterrence capabilities and boost the US' ability to attack Russia's satellites, thus granting the US absolute advantage against potential rivals around the world (Global Times, 2016). Considering that the US has deployed the anti-missile system in Romania and plans to do the same thing in Poland to contain Russia in Europe, Russia has every reason to be aware that the THAAD system can serve as its geopolitical threat in the Asia-Pacific region, which means that Russia will be restrained in the both west and east by the US into a disadvantageous position.

Consequently, in the second term of Obama administration, Russia-US relations remained as negative as Sino-US relations in the parameter of the THAAD issue, for the THAAD system can jeopardize Russia's national interests. In view of the rapid deployment of THAAD after Trump's coming into office, Russia has showed stronger

reactions and made more preparations, such as launching its top-level nuclear submarine. Therefore, it is expected that clashes between Russia and the US on the THAAD issue can escalate in the future.

**Conclusion:** In the second term of Obama administration, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US revealed a typical type of “stable marriage”. By implementing the THAAD system with the ROK, the US has complicated the regional situation and triggered discontent of China and Russia, thus making it play a role of pariah, while China and Russia act as bilateral partners to confront the US’ move. In addition, the US aims to utilize the THAAD system, one aspect of its “pivot to Asia” strategy, to contain China and Russia and guarantee the US’ presence in the Asia Pacific region, which illustrates the offensive realism. The cooperation between China and Russia in campaigning against the US’ deployment of the THAAD in the ROK to secure their respective national security interests manifests the neo-liberal institutionalism. Further, given the fact that the deployment of the THAAD system has been more rapid since the start of Trump’s administration, the confrontation between China-Russia and the US can be clearer later. The situation of Northeast Asia can become more complicated and unstable in consideration of China’s sanctions on the ROK.

## **7. Conclusion**

The thesis seeks to explore the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the second term of Obama administration. During that period, the US conducted the “pivot to Asia” strategy; as the second largest economy in the world, China put forward “The Belt and Road” initiative and established the AIIB to acquire more global impact; suffering setbacks in the West, Russia attached more importance to maintaining its position in the Asia-Pacific region, which highlights the triangle of Sino-Russia-US geopolitically. Given the fact that the three countries serve as big powers to impose influence in the international community, the interactions among the three countries concern not only regional development and security but also global strategic balance. Since some “top events” have bubbled up in the second term of Obama administration,

it is of significance to consider the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the international relations for that period.

By means of Realism and Liberalism, the thesis conducts analyses through four parameters in the second term of Obama administration. Specifically, Realism includes the offensive realism of Mearsheimer and the theory of triangle of Dittmer. The former argues that setting the final goal of developing to the hegemon, states will persistently exert themselves to gain increment in their portion of world power at the sacrifice of their rivals, which can help analyze the confrontation and containment in the three bilateral relations. The latter presents a framework to understand the features of the triangle relations, thus providing insights into probing into the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in a macroscopic view. Liberalism refers to two notions here, neo-liberal institutionalism and economic interdependency. The former insists the possibility of cooperation among states with similar interests in the anarchic system, which can explain the positive relations in the triangle of Sino-Russia-US for some issue. The latter focuses on economic interactions between states and stresses on the importance of international trade, which can illustrate the interactions within the triangle of Sino-Russia-US in the parameter of trade.

As for the four parameters/issues, it refers to trade, counter-terrorism, the South China Sea issue and the THAAD issue. (1) In the parameter of trade, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US reveals the characteristics of “romantic triangle” with China serving as the “pivot”, for China enjoyed positive trade relations with Russia and the US respectively while Russia-US bilateral trade remained as stagnant as before. (2) In the parameter of counter-terrorism, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US tends to be the type of “ménage a trios” or “stable marriage”. Confronted with more complicated global security situation and the threat of ISIS, three countries have recognized the necessity and significance of anti-terror cooperation among the triangle, thus indicating the possibility of the type of “ménage a trios”. However, the US plays a vital role in influencing the model of the triangle since it has not abandoned the Cold War mentality and “double standards” towards terrorism completely, which can result in the type of “stable marriage”. (3) In the parameter of the South China Sea issue, there

exist evident interest conflicts between China and the US while Russia holds a neutral stance on the issue. Therefore, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US is inclined to be either the type of “romantic triangle” with Russia as the “pivot” or the type of “stable marriage” for Russia shares more common interests with China compared with the US on the issue. In brief, Russia can play a delicate role within the triangle in the parameter of the South China Sea issue. (4) In the parameter of the THAAD issue, the interactions among the three countries reflect a typical triangle of “stable marriage” with the US as the “pariah”. China and Russia stood together to oppose the THAAD system for it can jeopardize their national security interests, disrupt the regional situation and strategic balance while the US promoted the deployment of the THAAD to gain more presence in the Asia-Pacific region to contain China and Russia.

To sum up, in the second term of Obama administration, it can be seen that the current triangle of Sino-Russia-US is not a fixed model in the complicated and changeable international situation, which means that three states can balance and restrict each other because no one embraces the absolute predominance in the international issue against the background of globalization. Relatively speaking, China and Russia share more common interests to cooperate with each other while the US has more conflicts with the other two nations, thus leading to the triangle of Sino-Russia-US the type of “stable marriage” in most cases. Besides, two features of the current triangle should be paid attention to. For one thing, the position of China is highlighting the triangle with China’s rise and development, such as China’s “pivot” role in the triangle under the parameter of the trade. For another, though Russia was blocked in its relations with the West due to Ukraine crises, Putin has utilized its “tough diplomacy” to break out an encirclement to get more initiatives in international issues, such as Russia’s acclaimed counter-terrorism behaviors and the “pivot” role in the South China Sea issue, which indicates an upward role in the triangle of Sino-Russia-US as well. Nevertheless, the US stills plays a vital role in impacting the developmental direction of the triangle since it regards both China and Russia as potential threats.

In conclusion, in the second term of Obama administration, the triangle of

Sino-Russia-US is dynamic. Among the three bilateral relations, Sino-US relations are the most important one with the tortuous development; Sino-Russia relations are the closest one with deep development on the basis of mutual trust and understandings; Russia-US relations are the most complicated one with uncertainties and games. Considering that the world is faced with a severe terrorism challenge and the US will make further efforts in deploying its anti-missile system in the east-Europe and the ROK, the triangle of Sino-Russia-US deserves keeping a close eye on in the future.

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