

The evolution of the China-Russia-United States strategic triangle (1972-2025): towards a tripolar international order and the new Eurasian strategic triangle

La evolución del triángulo estratégico China-Rusia-Estados Unidos (1972-2025): hacia un orden internacional tripolar y el nuevo triángulo estratégico euroasiático

Dr. C. Manuel J. Rocha Pino

Postdoctoral Researcher (SECIHTI) at Autonomous Metropolitan University, Cuajimalpa Campus, in Mexico. He holds a PhD in International Relations and European Integration from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and holds a Master in Asian and African Studies (China) from El Colegio de México

e-mail: rochapino@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-7295-9056

Fecha de recepción: noviembre de 2025

Fecha de aprobación: enero de 2026

Fecha de publicación: junio de 2026

Abstract

This research analyzes the evolution of the strategic triangle structured between China-Russia-United States since 1972. The characteristics acquired by the strategic triangle in three periods are analyzed: 1. The Cold War period (1972-1989) characterized by a coalition established between China and the United States to contain the Soviet Union. 2. The Post-Cold War period (1996-2021) characterized by the development of the China-Russia strategic partnership. 3. The current period, from 2021 onwards, characterized by the policies of global strategic competition implemented by the United States to maintain its hegemony over the international system. The research analyzes how the Sino-Russian partnership has preferred to adapt to the emergence of a tripolar international order (an evolution of the China-Russia-United States strategic triangle) through the structuring of a new strategic triangle in Eurasia (China-Russia-North Korea). Finally, the impact of the new Eurasian strategic triangle on the system is analyzed, highlighting three consequences: 1. It maintains the cohesion of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. 2. It avoids the strategic competition policies of the United States that seek to provoke a rupture into the Sino-Russian relationship. 3. It facilitates the

participation for actors from the Global South in cooperation mechanisms such as BRICS + and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since there is not formally a Sino-Russian defense alliance.

Keywords: *strategic triangle, strategic partnership, strategic competition, strategic stability, multipolarity.*

Resumen

La investigación analiza el desarrollo del triángulo estratégico estructurado entre China, Rusia y Estados Unidos a partir de 1972. Se analizan las características adquiridas por dicho triángulo en tres períodos: 1. El período de la Guerra Fría (1972-1989), caracterizado por la formación de una coalición entre China y Estados Unidos para contener a la Unión Soviética. 2. El período de Postguerra Fría (1996-2021), caracterizado por el desarrollo de la asociación estratégica entre China y Rusia. 3. El período actual, que comenzó en 2021, caracterizado por las políticas de competencia estratégica global implementadas por Estados Unidos para mantener su hegemonía en el sistema internacional. La investigación analiza cómo la asociación sino-rusa se ha adaptado al surgimiento de un orden internacional tripolar (una evolución del triángulo estratégico China-Rusia-Estados Unidos) mediante la estructuración de un nuevo triángulo estratégico en Eurasia (China, Rusia y Corea del Norte). Finalmente, se analiza el impacto del nuevo triángulo estratégico euroasiático en el sistema, destacando tres consecuencias: 1. Mantiene la cohesión en la asociación estratégica sino-rusa. 2. Evita las políticas de competencia estratégica de Estados Unidos que buscan provocar una ruptura en la relación sino-rusa. 3. Facilita la participación de actores del Sur Global en mecanismos de cooperación como el BRICS + y la Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai debido a que formalmente no se trata de una alianza de defensa sino-rusa.

Palabras clave: *triángulo estratégico, asociación estratégica, competencia estratégica, estabilidad estratégica, multipolaridad.*

Introduction

In this research, the triangular strategic relationship maintained between the People's Republic of China (China) - Russia (or the Soviet Union) and the United States (U.S.) is considered a structure of the international system having a history spanning more than seven decades. During this time, the strategic triangle has maintained a verifiable influence on the stability of the system, as well as on the behavior of various international actors. This triangular relationship was formed during the 1950s and 1960s, along the Cold War period: a context in which a relative equality in the military power was established among the three actors starting in 1964, when Maoist China carried out its first nuclear weapons tests.

In the initial stage, the triangular relationship was developed according to the logic of bipolar confrontation during the Cold War: that is, through the alliance framed in the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, which faced the communist powers against the spread of U.S. interests in Asia. However, due to the development of the Sino-Soviet rivalry that began in 1960, the subsequent development of the triangular relationship was not formed by the vertex of a Sino-Russian alliance that confronted the U.S. imperialism and its allies. On the contrary, from 1972 to 1989, the China-U.S.-Soviet Union triangular relations took the form of a diplomatic and strategic coalition maintained between Beijing and Washington against the power and international influence of Moscow (hereinafter the strategic triangle): this period encompassed most of Soviet leadership of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982). The strategic triangle is considered a defining structure, maintained among three of the international system's major powers, for the subsequent development and outcome of the Cold War period, culminating in the economic defeat and dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

The research uses a theoretical perspective that converges with classical realism in International Relations to develop an analysis about the trajectory of the strategic triangle as a structure of the international system; it

employs an analytic-deductive approach by collecting information for subsequent analysis. Specifically in the trajectory of the strategic triangle structured between China, Russia and the United States two actors have implemented a balance of power against a third party through a bilateral coalition; as mention P.R. Viotti and M.V. Kauppi (2012: 58-59):

Realists see anarchy as continuing to be a defining characteristic of the international system unless one state or some kind of superior international authority were constructed to provide a new order to the world through its position of dominance [....] Indeed, anarchy plus the distribution of capabilities among states define for many realists the international system at any one time, described by them typically as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Balances of power and alliances among states are the means realists conceive for sustaining international order.

On the other hand, Esther Barbé (2007: 197) defines the concept of the international system's structure as "the configuration of power arises from the relationships between actors. The notion of structure serves, at the analytical level, to establish the limits within which the actors operate as a whole". As part of the power relations that define the structure of the system, those maintained between the actors who can be considered as the main powers at a given historical moment are highlighted: considering to define their status as powers to variables such as the characteristics of their economic and military power (during the 20th and 21st centuries, the nuclear capacity and the potential of military industry to generate advances and innovations), their actorness capacity, the natural resources existing in their territory and the diversification of their interests abroad, the high labor qualifications of their population, the policies they implement to expand and strengthen their power and their capacity to call on other international actors to assist, as partners and allies, in their activities abroad (whether through the instrumentation of soft power or outright coercion). As Barbé mentions (2007: 197-198), the hierarchy among the actors (the powers/states of the system) is decisive in defining the structure: "to be more precise, we must define the structure as the configuration of power generated by the powers of the system." For the structural definition, the fundamental variables are the number of actors and the distribution of power among them: likewise, the actors with the greatest power "are responsible for converting the systemic logic into a conservative logic that defends the *statu quo*". The research considers that the triangular structure that has grouped the most powerful powers in the system for the longest continuous period of time is the China-Russia-U.S. strategic triangle: this is despite the periods of China's economic weakness (during the period of economic recovery following the Cultural Revolution and the first decade of the Chinese modernization process that began in 1978) and the Russian Federation (during the 1990s period of political and economic crisis) would have gone through.

A characteristic of the strategic triangle is that since 1979 (the date on which the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty formally expired and was not renewed) until today, none of the vertices that have formed the actors has acquired the structure of a bilateral alliance of mutual defense against a third party; however, in the context of the third decade of the 21st century, conditions could arise for two of the actors to officially form a defense alliance, mainly at the apex of the Sino-Russian relationship. The research analyzes the main characteristics that the strategic triangle has assumed, taking as a reference the 1972 Sino-American approach, through three distinct periods, into which this article is divided:

1. First period (1972-1989): The formation of the strategic triangle through a Sino-American coalition against the Soviet Union is analyzed. In this case, the coalition functioned by balancing Soviet power in certain contexts and through various actions (such as China's military confrontation with Vietnam in 1979 or Beijing's criticism of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980). During this period, Beijing and Washington clarified that they would not subordinate their interests to the operation of the coalition's activities through behavior

that can be analyzed using the concept of hedging. This period of the strategic triangle ended in June 1989 with the implementation of Western sanctions against China due to the violent events in the Tiananmen Square.

2. Second period (1996-2021): corresponds to the post-Cold War. During this period, the formation of the strategic triangle is analyzed, defined by a new international structure: the strategic partnerships of cooperation established between a variety of international actors because of the disappearance of the strategic, and especially ideological, confrontation that characterized the Cold War system. The period 1989-1996 can be considered a transitional stage for the conditions of the strategic triangle, and the relations between the powers in general, derived primarily from the commitment made by the George H.W. Bush administration to the Boris Yeltsin government not to expand the system of Western defense alliances, centered on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to the countries that had belonged to the Warsaw Pact. However, the implementation of the Clinton administration's Partnerships for Peace program in 1994, and the subsequent process of NATO expansion towards Eastern Europe, resulted in a redefinition of the Yeltsin administration's strategic relations with other powers: during the summit held in April 1996 in Shanghai, China and Russia established a strategic partnership agreement, in addition to culminating the negotiation of most of their border disputes. At the same time, they formed the negotiation and cooperation group known as the Shanghai Five along with three former Soviet countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), being the original nucleus of the future Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) created in 2001, which Uzbekistan also joined (Fabelo-Concepción, 2022).

Since the establishment of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in 1996, the terms of the new strategic triangle for the post-Cold War era were defined by the power acquired by the United States, the victor in the bipolar conflict, compared to the Sino-Russian vertex characterized by China's economic emergence and a period of recovery in Russia (during the remainder of the 1990s, both sides needed dialogue and cooperation with Washington in a variety of areas). In this context, the Eurasian actors were unable to establish a defense alliance (the strategic partnership was presented as a mechanism for cooperation, and its principles were oriented toward publicly declaring that it was not an alliance, did not seek confrontation, or was not directed against third parties). However, Russia and China also implemented a characteristic of the triangular structure that has prevailed to this day: since 1996, the strategic triangle has been unfavorable to the United States.

3. Third period (2021-present): the U.S. strategic competition for global hegemony and the formation of a tripolar world order. This period has been contextualized by the decision made by the Joseph Biden administration to implement geopolitical containment policies against Russia and China based on military confrontation. Officially, this period started with the inauguration of the Joseph Biden government in January 2021 and reinforced by the resumption of the process to admit Ukraine to NATO supported by the Biden administration. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict that began on February 24, 2022 (in Russia it is called the Special Military Operation) was triggered by Russia's opposition to NATO's expansion into Ukraine in the former Soviet Union (a well-known source of tension between Russia and the U.S. since the 1990s), as well as other conflicts that have added to the Russian-Ukrainian relationship since 2014, such as the Russian intervention in the Donbass region (from Moscow's perspective, justified as a way to protect the Russian-speaking population of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions).¹

1 On February 24, 2022, in his speech announcing the military intervention in Ukraine, President Putin stated: "It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to

As analyzed in the research, by early 2025, the Biden's strategic competition for global hegemony had failed to achieve two of its main objectives (declared by Washington): regime change in Russia (the overthrow of the Putin's government) and Biden's intention to prevent China from becoming the "world's leading power" (an unilateral assessment based on the White House perception). The research analyzes the responses issued by the Sino-Russian strategic partnership to a period of continuous provocations and military and diplomatic escalations (the latter aspect, particularly against China). Towards the end of the period, in mid-2024, a new strategic triangle with distinctive characteristics was formed in Eurasia, now composed of China, Russia and North Korea, which appears to be an alternative to the integration of a Sino-Russian defense alliance: the reasons for the Sino-Russian reluctance to conclude a formal defense agreement (in the current international context) and the characteristics of the military equation of the aforementioned "new strategic triangle in Eurasia" are also analyzed (the China-Russia-North Korea triangle can be considered a structure of strategic cooperation among the involved parties).

Finally, January 2025 is considered the beginning of a new stage with the inauguration of Donald Trump for his second term: Trump's strategic competition policies have contributed to formation of a tripolar world order, with the China-Russia-United States strategic triangle as the main structure of the system. Although China and Russia have shown a preference for the development of a multipolar cooperation system, the U.S.'s continuity of strategic competition and unilateralism has led to the structuring of the tripolar order. In the future, a multipolar group of world powers, in addition to China, Russia and the US, could also include India and the European Union (although considering a significant weakening of the EU due to the failure of the proxy war against Russia).

First period: The formation of the strategic triangle during the Cold War system (1972-1989)

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the existence of the triangular relationship began to show significant importance for a set of conflicts and regional instability in Asia, such as the Korean War (1950-1953), the spread of communism in Asia and the containment policies implemented by the United States and its allies (through bodies such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), created in 1954), the first two crises in the Taiwan Strait (between 1954-1955 and 1958), and the evolution of the military conflict in Vietnam (1955-1975). Likewise, during the 1960s, the triangular relationship showed a verifiable impact on some actors located in Africa and Latin America. In 1960, the beginning of the Sino-Soviet split intensified a process of competition between the Soviet Union and Maoist China to exercise leadership in the global communist movement and the national liberation movements of the Third World. Soviet agents could take the lead in communist-oriented regimes in Africa or Asia, while China found some interlocutors among Eastern European regimes dissatisfied with the hegemony exercised by the Nikita Khrushchev regime (1953-1964), as in the cases of Tito's Yugoslavia or Enver Hoxha's regime in Albania (Whiting, 1995). However, until the end of this decade, the triangular relationship still showed a regional scope: this condition began to modify as Chinese diplomacy implemented during the period of the Cultural Revolution showed a radicalization and tensions in the Sino-Soviet conflict worsened, involving border disputes, which

expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border" [...] "Despite all that, in December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO's non-expansion. Our efforts were in vain. The United States has not changed its position. It does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia on a matter that is critical for us. The United States is pursuing its own objectives, while neglecting our interests" (Putin, 2022).

included reciprocal threats about the use of nuclear weapons between them. In March 1969, the outbreak of a war between the communist powers over a border dispute (in this case, an island in the Ussuri River, a tributary of the Amur River, in Manchuria) led to a gradual change in the priorities of Maoist foreign policy (Robinson, 1995).

Following the last events, Mao's government viewed Moscow's rival regime as the main threat to China and initiated a rapprochement with the U.S. government as a strategy to counter the Soviet threat. Domestically, the Maoist regime eliminated political cadres opposed to rapprochement with the United States, the most significant example being the 1971 death of Lin Biao, a military officer and vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in a plane crash. For its part, since the beginning of its term in office in 1969, the Richard Nixon administration had shown a more conciliatory attitude toward Beijing, culminating in tacit support for the recognition of China by the United Nations in October 1971 (through the approval of Resolution 2758, promoted by Albania) and the expulsion of Taiwan's representative.

On the bilateral level, Washington and Beijing had established secret contacts during 1971, which culminated in the so-called secret trip of President Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, to China in July and the meeting of Nixon with CCP's Chairman Mao in Beijing in February 1972. This date can be considered the beginning of the formation of the strategic triangle. During the 1970s, the strategic triangle was configured as a coalition that pursued a policy of balance against the interests of the Soviet Union and its allies, although considering the ideological differences existing in the Sino-American relationship. China and the United States did not seek to establish an alliance or deepen a relationship that could hinder them in other international arenas (Robinson, 1995). By keeping their options open without making commitments beyond certain objectives of interest for the anti-Soviet coalition, China and the U.S. acted according to a hedging policy; hedging can be defined as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another" (Goh, 2005: viii). Some of the coalition's most significant outcomes were the rivalry between China and Vietnam that led to the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979 (which saw the Soviet Union's main ally in Southeast Asia suffer a period of isolation from its regional neighbors), Washington's recognition of the one-China principle and the establishment of Sino-American diplomatic relations the same year, as well as China's refusal to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980.

After the beginning of China's modernization process in 1978, Beijing's aspirations to exercise leadership in the global spread of communism diminished, and the implementation of peace and development diplomacy under Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s reduced the common goals of the Sino-American coalition. Furthermore, the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in the Soviet Union, beginning in 1985, led to a gradual decrease in tensions in Sino-Soviet relations. Gorbachev's government initiated a rapprochement with Beijing, resulting in a visit by the Soviet leader in May 1989: a crucial year for China's foreign relations. On the one hand, shortly after Gorbachev's visit, student anti-corruption protests in Beijing intensified, culminating in the repression in Tiananmen Square. The coincidence of the protests, Gorbachev's visit, and the crisis that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall the following November generated deep distrust in Beijing toward the Gorbachev regime (the new Chinese leadership headed by Jiang Zemin supported the August 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev). On the other hand, the 1989 sanctions imposed by Western countries against Beijing, led by the U.S., brought about the end of the first stage of the strategic triangle. For China, the period from 1989 to 1992 was one of uncertainty and distrust toward the outside

world until some European countries, such as Germany and Italy, gradually began to lift economic sanctions against China. In 1992, China would once again demonstrate its openness to the outside world, beginning with Deng Xiaoping's so-called Southern Tour (an endorsement of the Chinese leadership's commitment to economic modernization), while Beijing recognized the governments of the Russian Federation and the independent post-Soviet republics.

Second Period: U.S ' s Unilateralism and the Multipolarity Discourse in the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership (1996-2021)

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of new mechanisms for cooperation among actors in the international system. Some of the most significant were cooperative partnership mechanisms, also known as strategic partnerships. The introduction of the concept of "partnership" to define a mechanism of cooperation or common action between the powers of the system can be traced back to the contacts established between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union between 1990 and 1991 during the negotiations for nuclear weapons control and the construction of a new security order in Europe. This contextualized in the process of the Germany's reunification (in practice the annexation of the former Democratic Republic by the Federal Republic then headed by the government of Helmut Kohl) and the independence movements in the Baltic republics that then still belonged to the Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania whose independence was recognized by the Soviet authorities in September 1991) (Ko, 2006). Ko Sangtu mentions (2006: 208):

The origin of the term "strategic partnership" in international politics is difficult to pinpoint. Most likely it emerged from contacts between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1990 bilateral negotiations on how to build a post-Cold War European security order. "Strategic partnership" was used to denote the form of cooperation they entered into in order to obtain mutual gains in establishing or distributing their spheres of influence.

From the perspective of Gorbachev's dying regime, the end of the Cold War also meant the easing of strategic tensions in Europe, which entailed a necessary redefinition of NATO's strategic objectives and a Western commitment that the Soviet Union would not be threatened (in the new context, a structure such as the strategic triangle was irrelevant). During the NATO summits in London 1990 and Rome 1991, the characteristics of a New Concept of Alliance Security were outlined. This prioritized dialogue and cooperation while maintaining its capacity for collective defense (Woodliffe, 1998). The 1991 NATO Strategic Concept document specified: "Even in a non-adversarial and cooperative relationship, Soviet military capability and build-up potential, including its nuclear dimension, still constitute the most significant factor of which the Alliance has to take account in maintaining the strategic balance in Europe. The end of East-West confrontation has, however, greatly reduced the risk of major conflict in Europe" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1991).

In February 1992, the concept of the Russian-American partnership was formalized in diplomatic terms during the bilateral U.S.-Russian summit held at Camp David, Washington, between President George H.W. Bush and President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation. At this same summit, the Russian and American sides issued a joint communiqué declaring that "that both states no longer consider each other enemies and commit to the development of a partnership based on mutual understanding and trust" (Gajauskaitė, 2013: 191). Likewise, the Bush administration made an informal commitment (on a discursive level, without an official document endorsing it) not to expand NATO into the former Soviet space as a way of ensuring that the new Russia would not be threatened; in his speech, Bush added, "Russia and the United

States are forging a new relationship, and it is based on trust; it is based on a commitment to economic and political freedom; it is based on a strong hope for a true partnership" (The New York Times, 1992). The lack of an official agreement demonstrating Russian-U.S. negotiations to limit NATO expansion into Eastern Europe has had consequences that extend to the present: Bush's commitment did not last long, and it was disavowed by his successor, Bill Clinton (1993-2001), at the beginning of his term in office.

In 1994, the Clinton administration announced a set of defense cooperation programs between NATO and the Eastern European countries grouped through agreements known as Partnerships for Peace (PfP). In practice, NATO's PfP could function as preparation mechanisms for future countries interested in participating in an enlargement process (between the countries interested in participating in a future NATO accession were Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, which officially became members in March 1999) (Williams, 1995). Although the Yeltsin government joined the PfP in 1995 as one of its founding countries, it also criticized the program's role as a facilitator of NATO's expansion process (Russia was an official member of the program until 2021, although its cooperation with NATO had been suspended since the 2014 sanctions).

An initial response by the Yeltsin government to NATO's strategic move was to diversify its cooperative relations with other international actors, which meant formalizing new partnership mechanisms beyond U.S. influence: in 1994, through the establishment of a cooperative partnership with China, as well as a strategic partnership with the European Union. The Russian government's discontent with NATO's activities was compounded by a pro-Serbian stance in the war then raging in the former Yugoslavia. In January 1996, a significant change in the composition of the Russian government occurred: the appointment of Evgeny Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs, which marked the beginning of a period in which officials with a Eurasianist perspective were included in the Russian foreign policy elite. An immediate consequence of the new foreign policy was the establishment of the China-Russia strategic partnership in April 1996. In September 1998, Primakov succeeded Viktor Chernomyrdin as Prime Minister of Russia, which meant the departure of the pro-American group from the Yeltsin government (Rocha Pino, 2023).

The post-Cold War period also presented significant threat perceptions for China during the first half of the 1990s, particularly related to unilateral U.S. behavior, demonstrated in its interventions in Iraq and Somalia. This increased Beijing's fear of being subjected to the implementation of containment policies that would hinder the objectives of its modernization project. Beijing's response also consisted of a diversification of its foreign relations through strategic partnership mechanisms focused on cooperation, primarily economic, as well as the implementation of new diplomatic discourses around cooperative diplomacy, the New Security Concept, and the multipolarity of the world order. In the case of strategic partnerships, the first mechanism of this type was agreed by China with Brazil in 1993 and in the following years Chinese diplomacy continued to add new interlocutors: in 1996 with the Sino-Russian partnership agreement and in 1997 through a strategic cooperation partnership with France —the first of its kind between China and a Western power (Rocha Pino, 2007).

According to Anatoly Klimenko (2005: 1-2), the concept of strategic partnership can be defined as an "organizational means for establishing cooperative ties in key areas" based on the agreements that the partners have established, aligning their interests and rights equally, gains and responsibilities, and working toward shared strategic objectives." For Beijing, the "strategic" content of the cooperation plans surrounding the partnership mechanism involved long-term participation by the partners in China's modernization project. As Fraser Cameron and Zheng Yongnian mention (2008), the strategic partnership was an "organizational means that will serve to coordinate a bilateral agenda conceived of in common

objectives that can be achieved in the long term: the conjunction of the terms "partner" and "strategy" gives this temporal connotation."

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership was built on the friendship and bilateral cooperation agreements of 1992 and 1994, and the Sino-Russian border agreements of 1991 and 1994. From the Chinese government's perspective, the strategic partnership was to emphasize "three no's": it was not an alliance, it did not seek to create confrontation, and it was not directed against a third country, instead focusing primarily on cooperation (Shi, 1996). Similarly, from the Chinese perspective, the partnership was based on its discourse on the multipolarity of the world order, as mentioned in the 1996 Sino-Russian Joint Summit Declaration:

The developing trend toward a multipolar world and the desire for peace, stability, cooperation, and development have become the main issues in international life today. However, the world is far from calm. Hegemony, power politics, and the repeated imposition of pressure on other countries continue to occur (*Beijing Review*, 1996: 7).

In 1997, the Sino-Russian partnership held another summit in Moscow, where it issued a "Declaration on Global Multipolarization and the Formation of a New International Order." The highlights of the Declaration included both countries' commitment to promoting global multipolarization; implementing "a new and universally applicable concept of security," referring to China's New Security Concept; strengthening the role of the UN Security Council; and working together to further expand their strategic partnership (*Beijing Review*, 1997: 7-8).

However, some differences should be noted between China's concept of multipolarity during Jiang Zemin's government and the concept of multipolarity formulated by Russia (especially after the Russian economic crisis of 1998 and NATO's intervention in Serbia in 1999): while for China multipolarity was a concept that legitimized its relations of cooperation with the actors of the international system, for the benefit of its modernization project, for Moscow's multipolarity acquired a mostly realistic connotation in a scenario of frequent disagreements and tensions with Washington and Western allies:

In the Russian perspective, balance of power sometimes looks as the only, or at least the most adequate, model of the multipolar world [...] the Kremlin-promoted multipolar world is a direct and unequivocal alternative to globalization (Makarychev and Morozov, 2011: 361-362).

The nuanced differences regarding multipolarity concerned the objectives the SCO should pursue during its first years of existence: a mechanism for economic and trade cooperation (from China's perspective) or a balanced mechanism with a military cooperation agenda (for Moscow). Similarly, in 1998, Primakov proposed to China and India the formation of a strategic triangle to effectively counterbalance the U.S.; at the time, Beijing and New Delhi declined the proposal (Ma, 2005).²

For the next two decades, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership remained the most advanced cooperation mechanism within the strategic triangle, albeit without the intention of transforming into a mutual defense agreement (during the Clinton administration, the U.S. denied the existence of a partnership agreement with China, while the fragile Russian-U.S. partnership had been rendered unviable because NATO's expansion plans). The Sino-Russian reluctance to establish a defense agreement was clarified by

2 An approach reminiscent of Primakov's triangle proposal occurred during the SCO summit held in Tianjin in 2025. At the time, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was receptive to establishing a triangular dialogue for Indian-Sino-Russian cooperation in the context of Donald Trump's tariff sanctions against India's trade —50 % tariffs on imports as a penalty for Indian purchases of Russian oil (TASS, 2025).

the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, signed by both parties in 2001, which renewed the peaceful terms of their strategic partnership, especially regarding to the "three no's" principle. The 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty states: "This Treaty neither affects the rights and obligations of the contracting parties in other international treaties of which they are a party to it, nor is it directed against any third country" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2001). This Treaty will keep it in effect until at least 2027, having been renewed for another five years in 2021.

The geopolitical crises that occurred during the first two decades of the 21st century, such as the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008 or the first Russian- Ukrainian conflict in 2014, gradually modify the strategic terms of the Sino-Russian relationship: in the face of a shared threat perception (because the hegemonic behavior of the United States), the Eurasian powers increased their economic and commercial relations (especially in the area of the energy market from Russia) as well as greater military cooperation, particularly in advanced technology sectors. Moreover, the shared threat perception increased significantly during the Joseph Biden administration starting in 2021: in addition to the Biden administration's strategic competition policies, geopolitical tensions were fueled by events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, U.S. pressure to sever economic relations between the European Union and China, increased tensions in the Taiwan Strait, Biden's intention to expand NATO to Ukraine, and U.S.'s export controls on Western companies selling advanced semiconductors to China. As S.C. Winkler mentions on the concept of *strategic competition* (2023: 334-335): "Donald J. Trump and Joseph Biden administrations have advanced the concept as a goal to pursue, rather than as something to be aware of, manage, or stabilize. Despite the centrality of "strategic competition" to U.S. foreign policy, neither administration has defined the concept's goals, means, or limitations. Ultimately, this sparse and ahistorical interpretation of "strategic competition" drives a downward spiral of ever more tense relations between the USA and China". The following analyzes China's perception of the reasons that led to the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the strategic response to Western hostility through the Eurasian strategic triangle (China-Russia-North Korea): the strategic competition policies of the United States are analyzed as an implementation of power politics.

Third Period. The United States' Strategic Competition for Global Hegemony and the Formation of a Tripolar Order (2021-2025): towards the new Eurasian strategic triangle

The first high-level bilateral meeting between representatives of the government of the People's Republic of China and the newly inaugurated Biden administration took place in Anchorage, Alaska, on March 18, 2021. In addition to the discomfort of the polar winter in that region of the U.S. territory, the meeting occurred in a tense atmosphere "full of recriminations" on both sides: both in public and, above all, in private conversations. The U.S. side highlighted critical issues (priorities during the Trump administration) such as the situations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, pressure against Taiwan and China's responsibility for alleged "cyberattacks" against U.S. interests. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, stated: "These actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability." Similarly, the White House National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, added that China was launching "an assault on fundamental values" supported by the U.S. (France 24, 2021). A few days later, during a White House press conference, when asked about the outcome of the Anchorage meeting, President Biden commented:

I see stiff competition with China. China has an overall goal, and I don't criticize them for the goal, but they have an overall goal to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world,

and the most powerful country in the world. That's not going to happen on my watch because the United States are going to continue to grow and expand (Biden, 2021).

Just weeks into his term, Biden stated that one of his main foreign policy priorities was to develop a strategic competition for global hegemony against Beijing. Later, in the *2022 National Security Strategy*, the White House (2022b: 23) defined China and Russia as "strategic competitors" and reiterated "Beijing has ambitions to create an expanded sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power." According to Winkler (2023: 351) Using strategic competition, therefore, allowed the Biden administration to both intervene conceptually and advance a political project."

During 2021, other priorities of Biden's administration were the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, having tragic results for the Afghan population collaborating with the Western occupiers; the renewed support for Ukraine's accession to NATO; and the creation of new mechanisms for military cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the AUKUS (Australia-UK-U.S.) alliance with a clear anti-China orientation. Of the above strategic moves, the one that received the strongest opposition from a third actor was NATO's expansion into the former Soviet space: during the second half of 2021 and early 2022, Vladimir Putin's government issued diplomatic warnings, as well as a mobilization of Russian troops towards the Russian-Ukrainian border, as a way to deter Ukraine's accession to NATO. These warnings were responded to by the Western allies with the historic Germany-U.S. Ultimatum against Russia on February 7, 2022.

The German-American Ultimatum (from Russia's perception, a strategic threat) was issued jointly in Washington by President Biden and German Prime Minister Olaf Scholz. Through the February 2022 Ultimatum, the U.S. and German governments threatened the President Vladimir Putin's government with sanctions and the destruction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline if the Russian army initiated a military intervention in Ukraine. At the joint press conference held at the White House during the German-American summit on February 7, Biden declared:

If Russia invades—that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine again— then there will be—we— there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it (The White House, 2022a).

Supporting Biden's statement, the Chancellor Scholz added: "I want to be absolutely clear: We have intensively prepared everything to be ready with the necessary sanctions if there is a military aggression against Ukraine" [...] "And possibly this is a good idea to say to our American friends: We will be united, we will act together, and we will take all the necessary steps. And all the necessary steps will be done by all of us together" (The White House, 2022a). Although the Kremlin did not make an immediate official response to the German-American Ultimatum, this research considers that the threat to "bring an end to it" to the Nord Stream 2, as a form of sanction, was one of the triggers for the beginning of Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Afanasiev, 2022).³

On February 24, President Putin justified the Russian intervention in Ukraine in the following terms:

Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance's infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent

3 In September 2022, at the time the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines were destroyed, the Kremlin spokesperson Maria Zakharova "pointed out" the Biden's threat: "Zakharova said that the US President must answer the question if Washington realized its threat against the pipeline" [...] ""There is a big difference between 'not engage' and 'put an end to' [...] "It was the latter that the US President said"" (TASS, 2022).

to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons. For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation [...] In this context, in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia's Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation. The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation (Putin, 2022).

On February 4, 2022, amidst the tensions preceding the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Sino-Russian relationship announced that their strategic partnership had acquired the characteristics of a "no limits" partnership, although without fundamentally modifying the principles that had shaped the strategic partnership since 1996. During the Sino-Russian bilateral summit in Beijing, Presidents Xi Jinping and Putin issued in their Joint Declaration:

[China and Russia] call for the establishment of a new kind of relationships between world powers on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation. They reaffirm that the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries (The Kremlin, 2022).

The use of the term "no limits" did not imply a change in the relationship towards a defense alliance.⁴

In the context of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is relevant to understand the Chinese government's assessment of the reasons for a war unleashed in a self-interested manner by Washington (and not just the implementation of a diplomatic discourse such as the concept of "no limits"): the information for this assessment was formulated in the following weeks. On March 26, 2022, in Poland, during his visit to Europe and after having held a busy agenda of high-level summits with the Western Allies in the previous days (between March 24-25: NATO Summit, meeting with G-7 leaders, and the United States-European Union summit), President Biden openly declared the need to promote a political regime change in the Russian Federation: "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power" (Biden announced it during his speech delivered in front of the Royal Castle in Warsaw, referring to President Putin) (Biden, 2022). With this statement, Biden acknowledged that one of the objectives of the conflict was to provoke the overthrow of Putin's government and promote regime change in Russia. Despite the strategic significance of Biden's remarks, the White House attempted to dismiss them as a mere lapse by the President. However, just when

4 In early January 2022, during the month preceding the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the government of Kazakhstan suffered an attempted coup that began with violent protests in the country's main cities (in a process like the so-called "color revolutions"). To counter the coup attempt, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called for the support of the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to control the situation. The Russian-led CSTO forces helped restore stability to Kazakhstan: this event can be considered an attempt to destabilize the Central Asian region prior to the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Dubnov, 2022).

the matter seemed forgotten, on April 2, in an editorial in *The Economist* magazine, the remarks were analyzed and described as a "*gaffe*": "The political *gaffe*, the commentator Michael Kinsley memorably observed, is when a politician inadvertently speaks the truth" [...] "Ukraine is probably not as important to Biden as, say, Taiwan. The United States sees Russia as a disruptor and China as the only challenge to its supremacy" (*The Economist*, 2022: 23-27).

On the other hand, as an initial reaction to Biden's statements, the Chinese Communist Party-affiliated *Global Times* published the opinion of academic and expert Wang Yiwei, close to Xi Jinping's leadership and at the time the vice president of the Xi Jinping Thought Institute on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era and, also, Director of the Institute of International Affairs, both belonging to Renmin University in Beijing. Regarding the Biden's statement about President Putin, Wang assessed: "Biden has just said what's really on his mind about the Ukraine crisis. All of those sanctions, stigmatizations and demonization against Putin and Russia just serve one key purpose - to make Russia collapse again, like the West did to the Soviet Union in the past. U.S. decision-makers like Biden are expecting another 'Mikhail Gorbachev' to emerge and replace Putin. This is the best result that the U.S. hopes to get" (Wang, 2022). Despite contradictory clarifications from the U.S. government, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated in April 2022 in Kyiv that a strategic objective of sanctions on Russia and support for Ukraine was "Russia's military capabilities weakened". "So it has already lost a lot of military capability. And a lot of its troops, quite frankly. And we want to see them not have the capability to very quickly reproduce that capability" (Austin, 2022).⁵ It confirmed the perception that Biden was seeking the overthrow of Putin's government.

Which could be the U.S. government's reasons to promote a regime change in Russia? These could be found in support for a hypothetical Russian government largely favorable to U.S. interests, both economically (access for Western companies to Russia's natural resources, especially energy and mining) and attracting a pro-Western Russia to support U.S. geopolitical preferences (something that has not happened since the 1990s), mainly toward Washington's anti-China alliance sphere such as the AUKUS and the QUAD (thus reversing the current orientation of the strategic triangle). It can be considered that, for U.S. interests, during both Trump administrations and the Biden one, Moscow's membership in their anti-China alliance sphere has been presented as a necessity and that Russia is an essential country for U.S. alliances (Rocha Pino, 2022). Particularly, to the Biden administration's perception, a substantial shift in the strategic triangle to favor U.S. interests (through regime change in Russia) could lead to greater certainty in the outcome of its strategic competition with China. However, the Biden administration's plan to support regime change in Russia through military confrontation failed: in March 2025, new U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, acknowledged that, in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Volodymyr Zelensky's government had acted by leading a proxy war against Russia with U.S. support (a reality that, ominously, the Biden administration had always refused to acknowledge): "And frankly, it's a proxy war between nuclear powers – the United States, helping Ukraine, and Russia – and it needs to come to an end" (Department of State, 2025).

During the second half of 2024, Sino-Russian relations remained reluctant to establish a bilateral defense alliance, despite the Biden administration's aggressiveness. However, it did showcase a strategic innovation: the formation of a strategic triangle between China, Russia, and North Korea (the three nuclear-armed countries). This new strategic equation is a product of the Russia-North Korea Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed during President Putin's visit to North Korea in June 2024, which is a mutual

5 On the other hand, as Georgina Németh Lesznova mentions, in response to Russia's Special Military Operation, from February 2022 to July 2025, the European Union approved 18 packages of sanctions: (Lesznova, 2025: 2-3).

defense treaty between the two countries (Rodong Sinmun, 2024).⁶ The signing of the Russia-North Korea Treaty shocked the U.S. government, causing the Biden administration to change the U.S. strategic concept for the use of nuclear weapons; this new concept was made public in November 2024 (Department of Defense, 2024).

Through the new strategic triangle between Eurasian powers, Pyongyang maintains mutual defense treaties with China (1961) and with the Russian Federation (2024), thus structuring a defense equation in which China and Russia could act as *de facto* military allies in the event of North Korea suffering an aggression: the first military move in the context of the new strategic equation, endorsed by the 2024 Treaty, has been the participation of North Korean troops in the Russian region of Kursk, to face the invasion of Ukrainian troops into Russian territory. In the equation of the new Eurasian strategic triangle, Beijing and Moscow would have greater flexibility to act as military allies if, in their opinion, they should act in defense of North Korea. Likewise, the strategic equation does not interfere with the identity that both countries are interested in maintaining, as stabilizers of the international system and the multipolar cooperation, in the context of the BRICS+ group's economic cooperation activities (a Sino-Russian defense alliance would substantially modify the membership of third parties in BRICS+ and SCO, mainly for actors located in the Global South) (Xinhua, 2024). The China-Russia-North Korea strategic equation seems to supplement the conditions for a strengthening of Russia's position in the context of a post-war period of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in which Moscow may emerge victorious: however, the strengthening of the Sino-Russian vertex will cause the strategic triangle to remain unfavorable to the U.S., so a tripolar order may imply mostly hostile reactions from the Washington's power.

Since Donald Trump's second term inauguration in January 2025, the new administration's intention to move closer to Russia with the aim of weakening the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has been clear. Throughout his term as president-elect at the end of 2024, Trump's intention (through territorial claims on Greenland) to bring his country closer territorially to the core of Sino-Russian economic cooperation located on the Yamal Peninsula in the Russian Arctic (the center of China's investments in Yamal LNG energy) was also clear. However, the Kremlin has been cautious in the face of U.S. overtures and demands aimed at weakening the cohesion of the Sino-Russian partnership. This is evidence that the strengthening of the Sino-Russian apex, in addition to causing the strategic triangle to remain unfavorable for the U.S., has also provoked mostly hostile reactions from the U.S. (such as Trump aggression against Iran in June 2025, new threats of sanctions and ultimatums against Russia, an intensification of the tariff war against China, and the deployment of the US Navy in the Caribbean threatening Venezuela during November 2025). For the remainder of the Trump administration, an erratic U.S. process of adapting to the China-Russia-U.S. tripolar order through various attempts to fracture the Sino-Russian cooperative relationship will likely continue (another example could be the change of name of the U.S. Secretary of Defense to a "Secretary of War").

During the fall of 2025, what appears to be a new Trump strategy to directly confront the Eurasian strategic triangle began: 1) as a first step, in October 30, a few minutes before his bilateral meeting with Xi Jinping as a previous meeting to the APEC 2025 summit held in South Korea, Trump "announced on Truth Social while aboard his Marine One helicopter flying to meet Chinese President" to resume the United States' testing nuclear weapons; Trump argued that "because of other countries testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process

6 About the Russian-North Korean meeting, the Russian foreign policy adviser, Yuri Ushakov insisted "the agreement is not provocative or aimed against other countries, but is meant to ensure greater stability in northeast Asia. He said the new agreement will replace documents signed between Moscow and Pyongyang in 1961, 2000 and 2001" (India.com, 2024).

will begin immediately" [...] "Russia is second, and China is a distant third, but will be even within 5 years" (Reuters, 2025). However, Trump's announcement of a nuclear escalation would have consequences beyond strategic competition against Russia and China: "Making nuclear tests part of the "daily routine" may reduce the urgency of the nuclear taboo and increase the risk of nuclear escalation. Tensions with non-nuclear states would also be fueled, with those that are members of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) blaming the NPT's complete inefficiency" (Sinovets, 2025: 3).

"2) As a second step, through the fall 2025 escalation directed against China (and the Eurasian strategic triangle): in November 7, Japan's newly elected Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, declared in a speech to the Japanese Parliament that a "Chinese attack against democratically governed Taiwan could trigger a military response from Tokyo" under the criteria of Japan's *Peace and Security Legislation*, which allows the Japanese government to take military action in self-defense even abroad (The Asahi Shimbun, 2025).⁷ The Chinese government's response to Takaichi's statement was harsh criticism, and it is likely that during the new Japanese government's term, a geopolitical tense relationship will develop between China and Japan (including trade sanctions), perhaps unlike anything seen since the territorial dispute around the Diaoyu-Senkaku island around 2012-2013 (during Shinzo Abe's government). Furthermore, the U.S. State Department's deputy spokesperson, Tommy Pigott, posted on X that its support for Tokyo on this issue was "unwavering": "We firmly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo, including through force or coercion, in the Taiwan Strait...". Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, He Yongqian, stated: "Prime Minister Takaichi's openly erroneous remarks concerning Taiwan have fundamentally undermined the political foundation of China-Japan relations and severely damaged bilateral economic and trade exchanges" (The Asahi Shimbun, 2025). Likewise, in November 19, the Chinese spokesperson, Mao Ning, stated: "the erroneous remarks of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on Taiwan grossly interfere in China's internal affairs, trample on international law and basic norms in international relations, and challenge the post-WWII international order" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025a). Furthermore, the Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated: "it is shocking for a sitting Japanese leader to openly send a wrong signal of attempting to intervene militarily in the Taiwan question - saying what should not be said and crossing a red line that must not be touched" (Wang Yi, 2025). Regarding this Sino-Japanese diplomatic conflict, the United States' interest in escalating tensions in the Taiwan conflict is evident, in which now the US-Japan Security Treaty (+ Taiwan) faces off against the new Eurasian strategic triangle.⁸ The inclusion of the Taiwan conflict in Trump's strategic competition process was only a matter of time; as Chen Tsung-yen mentions: "The dynamics in the Taiwan Strait today reflect a convergence of conflicting interests, intensifying great-power competition, and recurring triggering events. At the core of these tensions are China's determination to achieve unification, the United States and its allies' view of Taiwan as a critical security partner and vital geoeconomic hub, and Taiwan's defense of its de facto sovereignty and international standing" (Chen, 2025: 19).

Beginning in 2026, a clarification of greater hostility in Washington's strategic competition could occur as the directives and objectives of Trump's administration's new *National Security Strategy* will be published.

7 The Legislation for Peace and Security was promoted by the government of Shinzo Abe and passed by the Parliament of Japan in September 2015. This Law allows the Japanese government to intervene in military conflicts abroad if it considers it necessary for its self-defense or for collective defense for allies. In an editorial quoting Japanese politicians and academics, the online newspaper *China Military* stated that the Takaichi government's arguments that "a Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency" and a "survival-threatening situation" were rhetoric that "lacks a legal basis, desecrates history, and risks undermining regional stability" [...] "Takaichi's fallacies regarding China are by no means an isolated incident but part of a broader agenda by right-wing forces to revive and bolster militarism (China Military, 2025).

8 The US-Japan Security Treaty is the American-Japanese mutual defense treaty signed in 1960.

Although China and Russia maintain a preference for developing cooperative relations in a multipolar environment, Eurasian partners have also recognized the importance of the strategic triangle in shaping a tripolar order that is fundamental to global stability. In this regard, the Sino-Russian partnership has underlined the concept of global strategic stability against U.S. behavior based on strategic competition. In May 2025, the concept of strategic stability was reaffirmed during the Sino-Russian summit in a Joint Communiqué: "[China and Russia] emphasize the utmost importance of maintaining and strengthening global strategic stability" [...] "The two sides emphasize the importance of maintaining constructive relations between major powers, including in addressing global strategic issues. Nuclear-weapon States, which bear special responsibility for international security and global strategic stability, should reject Cold War mentality and zero-sum games, resolve contradictions via dialogue on an equal footing and mutually respectful consultations, build confidence to avoid dangerous miscalculations and refrain from actions that generate strategic risks" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025b). Finally, the Global South countries will have to adapt to the growing relevance of the tripolar order and its impact on a considerable number of processes in the international system: perhaps a recommended attitude for many of these governments is a balanced and pragmatic approach towards the three major powers in which values such as respect for their sovereignty, strategic autonomy and their right to development prevail; an example could be the foreign policy implemented by the Republic of Kazakhstan during 2025: "In a striking display of diplomatic balancing, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev ended 2025 with a high-profile state visit to Moscow, where he and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration elevating bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership and alliance. The visit came just days after Tokayev returned from Washington, where he participated in a summit with U.S. President Donald Trump, and the September meeting with Xi Jinping in Tianjin" [...] "Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy has long sought to maintain balanced relations with Russia, China, the United States, and Europe. This approach allows Astana to position itself as a neutral and pragmatic actor even during periods of geopolitical tension, and explains why Tokayev is one of the few leaders trusted by both Washington and Moscow" (Matveev, 2025). For actors in the Global South, the risk of seeing their strategic autonomy weakened or even lost lies in becoming an instrument for strategic confrontation among the major powers.

Conclusion

The research analyzed the trajectory of the China-Russia-U.S. strategic triangle, which has been unfavorable to Washington since 1996: a condition that did not seem to contravene U.S. unilateral policies during the 1990s and 2000s but which in recent years has become a structure that increasingly limits the U.S.'s performance as the hegemonic power in the international system. The response of the Sino-Russian relationship to a threatening environment during the 2020s (which generated a new crisis in the Taiwan Strait in August 2022) reinforced policies of growing military, diplomatic, and economic-commercial cooperation (especially due to Russia's opening of its energy market to China).

The research analyzed the reasons why the Sino-Russian relationship has not chosen to formalize a defense agreement, as well as the current context of the new Eurasian strategic triangle (or China-Russia-North Korea strategic equation) that could arise from the post-war period of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: under these conditions Russia could be strengthened by the consolidation of a tripolar order with China, Russia, and the United States as the main powers of the system. However, during his first year in office, Donald Trump's second term has shown growing hostility due to the inability to break the cohesion of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership (U.S. has even distanced itself from neutral powers like India and Trump's allies behavior has led to the emergence of new structures such as the defense agreement

between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan). A scenario of confrontation for the tripolar order with the announcement of new diplomatic and military escalations (such as Takaichi's Japan possibly acting as a proxy for U.S. interests in the Taiwan Strait conflict).

References

- Afanasiev, V. (February 8, 2022). "Kremlin unfazed by Biden's Latest Warning on Nord Stream 2". Upstream Online. Moscow. <https://www.upstreamonline.com/politics/kremlin-unfazed-by-bidens-latest-warning-on-nord-stream-2/2-1-1165246>
- Austin, L. (April 25, 2022). "Austin says US wants to see Russia's military capabilities weakened." CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/25/politics/blinden-austin-kyiv-ukraine-zelensky-meeting>
- Barbé, E. (2007). "El sistema internacional." Relaciones Internacionales. Madrid: Tecnós.
- Beijing Review. (1996). "Joint Statement by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation." Beijing Review, May 13-19.
- Beijing Review. (1997). "Joint Statement by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Multipolarization of the World and the Establishment of a New World Order." Beijing Review, May 12-18.
- Biden, J. (March 26, 2022) "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in Power." Bloomberg News. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLN_P5u1ALI
- Biden, J. (March 25, 2021). Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference. Washington: The White House. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/25/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference/>
- Cameron, F. and Zheng, Y. (2008). "Key Elements of a Strategic Partnership." In China-UE: A Common Future, edited by Crossick, S. and Reuter, E. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- China Military. (November 20, 2025). "Japanese PM's Erroneous remarks Spark concerns of dragging Japan into Crisis". China Military, Xinhuanet. <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/W/N/16422915.html>
- Chen, T-y. (October 12, 2025). "The Taiwan Strait: the Flashpoint of War between China and US-Led Alliance". Journal of Chinese Political Science.
- Department of Defense of the United States. (November 7, 2024). Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States. Washington. <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF>
- Department of State of the United States. (March 5, 2025). Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Sean Hannity of Fox News. Washington. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-sean-hannity-of-fox-news/>
- Dubnov, A. (January 16, 2022). "Kazakhstan: A Coup, a Counter-coup and a Russian Victory". Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/16/a-coup-a-counter-coup-and-a-russian-victory-in-kazakhstan>
- Fabelo-Concepción, S. (2022). *Des-integración. Asia Central y las razones de la historia*. Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro.
- France 24. (March 19, 2021). "Las acusaciones cruzadas marcan el duro primer encuentro de EE. UU., y China en la era Biden." France 24. <https://www.france24.com/es/ee-uu-y-canad%C3%A1/20210320-es-tados-unidos-china-primer-encuentro-alaska-acusaciones>

- Gajauskaitė, I. (2013). "Strategic Partnerships in Foreign Policy: Comparative Analysis of Polish - Ukrainian and Lithuanian - Ukrainian Strategic Partnerships." *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 11(1).
- Goh, E. (2005). "Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies." *East-West Center Policy Studies* 16. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/26086/PS016.pdf>
- India.com. (2024). "Vladimir Putin visits North Korea in 24 Years, expected to meet Kim Jong Un". India.com. <https://www.india.com/news/world/vladimir-putin-visits-north-korea-in-24-years-expected-to-meet-kim-jong-un-7024223/>
- Klimenko, A. (2005). "Russia and China as Strategic Partners in Central Asia: Way to Improve Regional Security." *Far Eastern Affairs* 33(2).
- Ko, S. (2006). "Strategic Partnership in a Unipolar System: The Sino-Russian Relationship." *Issues & Studies* 42(3).
- Lesznova, G.N. (2025). "La política antirrusa de la Unión Europea hacia 2030: impactos ambiguos". *Cuadernos de Nuestra América* 17.
- Ma, Jiali. (2005). "New Development of China-Russia-India Triangle." *Contemporary International Relations* 15(7).
- Makarychev, A. and Morozov, V. (2011). "Multilateralism, Multipolarity, and Beyond: A Menu of Russia's Policy Strategies." *Global Governance* 17.
- Matveev, A. (November 13, 2025). "Between Trump and Putin: Tokayev Emerges as a Regional Diplomatic Powerbroker". *The Times of Central Asia* (Bishkek). <https://timesca.com/between-trump-and-putin-tokayev-emerges-as-a-regional-diplomatic-powerbroker/>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (November 19, 2025a). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on November 19, 2025. Beijing. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/202511/t20251119_11756196.html
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (May 9, 2025b). Joint Statement by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Global Strategic Stability. Moscow. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/xjpdelsjxgsfwcxjnslnwgzzslqd/202505/t20250509_11617864.html
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (July 24, 2001). Treaty of Good-Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Moscow. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367098.html
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (November 7, 1991). The Alliance's New Strategic Concept. Agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council. Brussels. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm
- Putin, V. (February 24, 2022). Address by the President of the Russian Federation. Moscow: The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>
- Robinson, T. (1995). "China confronts the Soviet Union: Warfare and Diplomacy in China's Inner Asian Frontiers." In *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 15. The Cultural Revolution: China in Turmoil, 1966-1969* edited by MacFarquhar, R. and Fairbank, J. K. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reuters (October 30, 2025). "Trump tells Pentagon to resume testing US nuclear weapons." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-asks-pentagon-immediately-start-testing-us-nuclear-weapons-2025-10-30/>

- Rocha Pino, M. J. (2023). "La asociación estratégica República Popular China-Federación Rusa (1996-2008): multipolaridad y percepciones de amenaza." Cuadernos de Nuestra América 9. <http://www.cna.cipi.cu/cna/article/view/189>
- Rocha Pino, M.J. (September 16, 2022). "América Latina observa con interés trabajo que se promueve en Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai." CGTN (Mexico). <https://espanol.cgtn.com/n/2022-09-16/HbEEcA/America-Latina-observa-con-interes-trabajo-que-se-promueve-en-Organizacion-de-Cooperacion-de-Shanghai/index.html>
- Rocha Pino, M. J. (2006). "China en transformación: la doctrina del desarrollo pacífico." *Foro Internacional* 186.
- Rodong Sinmun. (June 18, 2024). Treaty Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation Signed. The respected Comrade Kim Jong Un signs Treaty with Comrade Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Pyongyang: Rodong Sinmun (로동신문, Labour Daily). <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?OEAYMDIOLTA2LTIwLUgwMTRAMUBAQDFANw==>
- Sinovets, P. (November 10, 2025). "Thinking of Unthinkable: The Consequences of Trump's Decision to Resume Nuclear Testing". IAI Commentaries 25/58. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2558.pdf>
- Shi, Ze. (1996). "Chinese and Russian Partnership Growing." Beijing Review, April 29 – May 5.
- TASS. (September 28, 2022). "Biden threatened to 'put an end' to Nord Stream in February, Diplomat points out". TASS, Moscow. <https://tass.com/world/1514923>
- TASS. (August 31, 2025). "India, China determined to develop Bilateral Relations — PM." TASS, Tianjin. <https://tass.com/world/2009701>
- The Asahi Shimbun (November 21, 2025). "China says Trade Cooperation with Japan 'severely damaged' by Taiwan comments". The Asahi Shimbun, Tokyo. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/16171801>
- The Economist* (April 4, 2022). "What Joe Biden's gaffe says about his end-game in Ukraine." The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/04/02/what-joe-bidens-gaffe-says-about-his-end-game-in-ukraine>
- The Kremlin (February 4, 2022). Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. Moscow: The Kremlin. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>
- The New York Times* (February 2, 1992). "Bush and Yeltsin declare formal end to Cold War; agree to exchange Visits." <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/02/world/bush-and-yeltsin-declare-formal-end-to-cold-war-agree-to-exchange-visits.html>
- The White House. (February 7, 2022a). Remarks by President Biden and Chancellor Scholz of the Federal Republic of Germany at Press Conference. Washington. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/07/remarks-by-president-biden-and-chancellor-scholz-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-at-press-conference/>
- The White House. (October 12, 2022b). 2022 National Security Strategy. Washington. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>
- Viotti P.R. and Kauppi, M.V. (2012). "Realism: The State and Balance of Power". In: Viotti P.R. and Kauppi, M. V. (Eds.). *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism*. New York: Pearson Longman.

- Wang, Yi. (November 23, 2025). "Chinese Foreign Minister says Takaichi's remarks "Crossed a Red Line that must not be touched"". Global Times, Beijing. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202511/1348886.shtml>
- Wang, Y. (March 27, 2022). "Biden makes US tensions with Russia "Personal"; calling for "Regime Change" in a Nuclear Power Dangerous: Expert." Global Times, Beijing. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1256924.shtml>
- Whiting, A. (1995). "The Sino-Soviet Split." In *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 14. The People's Republic, Part 1: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949-1965*, edited by D. Twitchett, D. y Fairbank, J. K. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, N. (1996). "Partnership for Peace: Permanent fixture or declining Asset." *Survival* 38(1).
- Winkler, S. C. (2023). "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis". *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16.
- Woodliffe, J. (1998). "The Evolution of a New NATO for a New Europe". *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 47(1).
- Xinhua* (December 18, 2024). "China's diplomacy in 2024 injects stability into world." <https://english.news.cn/20241218/9612c1711dba48138977eccc6ddff884/c.html>

