



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2025.3.13>

UDC 94:327(510:73)

LBC 63.3(0)63-3



Submitted: 14.10.2023

Accepted: 24.04.2024

SINO-US MILITARY COOPERATION DURING THE COLD WAR: THE CASE OF “PEACE PEARL” PROGRAM

Menglong Li

Jilin University, Changchun, China

Yifu Lin

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Aleksandra A. Gulkova

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russian Federation

Abstract. *Introduction.* The subject of the article is the China-US “Peace Pearl” program carried out in the 1980s within the context of the China-USA-USSR triangle. The focus of this study is the analysis of the formation and collapse of the “Peace Pearl” program, including its background events, through the lens of realist international relations theory. This analysis will also take into account the changes in the international arena during that period. *Methods and materials.* The analysis is based on a number of theoretical documents and historical facts, in combination with basic works of realist international relations theory scholars. *Analysis.* In the first half of the 1980s, the international context, viewed through the lens of realism, dictated China’s rapprochement with the United States, with the “Peace Pearl” program aimed at jointly improving 50 Chinese J-8II fighters embodying it, which allowed China to enhance its military and aerospace industries. However, in the second half of the 1980s, the political climate significantly changed. China and the USA shifted from cooperation to traditional mild rivalry due to significant political changes in the USSR (serving as structural stimulus, from a realist perspective, for the changes in politics) and political turmoil in China in 1989. As a result, the “Peace Pearl” program was abandoned. *Results.* First, structural factors in the international arena significantly influenced both the formation and collapse of the “Peace Pearl” program, with the changes in the USSR politics playing a vital role in this process. Second, China’s role as a mediator in a bipolar international system allowed it to gain benefit from the international configuration, as it obtained opportunities for its military development through the realization of the “Peace Pearl” program. *Authors’ contribution.* Menglong Li – writing the original text of the article, conceptualization, project management. Yifu Lin – collecting and searching a wide range of historical materials, government documents, and academic journals relevant to the compilation of the “Peace Pearl” program from both the United States and China sides. Aleksandra Gulkova – analyzing the program through the prism of neorealism, writing the part concerning the realist perspective, mainly its practical application in the context of the evaluation of the “Peace Pearl” program, assessing Russian sources, and applying them to the analysis of the “Peace Pearl” program case.

Key words: “Peace Pearl” program, China-US relations, Sino-US military cooperation, China-US-Soviet triangle, the realist international relations theory.

Citation. Li Menglong, Lin Yifu, Gulkova A.A. Sino-US Military Cooperation During the Cold War: The Case of “Peace Pearl” Program. *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 4. Istoriya. Regionovedenie. Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University. History. Area Studies. International Relations], 2025, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 139-150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2025.3.13>

**КИТАЙСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКОЕ ВОЕННОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО
В ПЕРИОД ХОЛОДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ: ПРОГРАММА «ЖЕМЧУЖИНА МИРА»****Мэнлун Ли**

Цзилинский университет, г. Чанчунь, Китай

Ифу Линь

Гонконгский университет, г. Гонконг, Китай

Александра Андреевна ГульковаМосковский Государственный Институт Международных Отношений (университет)
МИД России, г. Москва, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. *Введение.* Предметом данной статьи является китайско-американский проект «Жемчужина мира», который реализовывался в 1980-е гг. в контексте анализа треугольника отношений Китай – США – СССР. Объект исследования – анализ появления и завершения проекта «Жемчужина мира» с точки зрения реалистической теории международных отношений, принимая во внимание изменения, происходившие на международной арене. *Методы и материалы.* Анализ основывается на ряде теоретических документов и исторических фактов в сочетании с основными работами представителей реалистической школы теории международных отношений. *Анализ.* В первой половине 1980-х гг. международная обстановка, если рассматривать ее через призму реализма, создала условия для сближения Китая с Соединенными Штатами, воплощением чего стала реализация проекта «Жемчужина мира», направленного на совместное совершенствование 50 китайских истребителей J-8II и позволившего Китаю укрепить свою военную и аэрокосмическую промышленность. Однако во второй половине 1980-х гг. политический климат существенно изменился. Китай и США перешли от сотрудничества к традиционному умеренному соперничеству из-за значительных политических изменений в СССР (послуживших структурным стимулом, с реалистической точки зрения, для данного поворота) и политических потрясений в Китае в 1989 году. В результате от проекта «Жемчужина мира» отказались. *Результаты.* Во-первых, структурные факторы на международной арене существенно повлияли как на формирование, так и на завершение проекта «Жемчужина мира», причем изменения в политике СССР сыграли важную роль в этом процессе. Во-вторых, роль Китая как посредника в биполярной международной системе позволила ему извлечь выгоду из международной конфигурации, поскольку он получил возможности для развития собственного военного потенциала. *Вклад авторов.* Мэнлун Ли – разработка концепции исследования, написание исходного текста статьи, руководство проектом. Ифу Линь – поиск и анализ исторических источников, включая китайские и американские правительственные документы, а также академические публикации, связанные с программой «Жемчужина мира». Александра Гулькова – написание раздела работы, посвященного реалистской теории международных отношений, а именно описание основных теоретических положений реализма, важных для анализа программы «Жемчужина мира» (концепции «баланса сил», «баланса угроз»); применение реалистского подхода к анализу фактического материала (выводы о восприятии СССР как большей угрозы со стороны КНР и США в первой половине – середине 1980-х гг. из-за увеличения (в представлении данных стран) таких показателей, как «наступательный потенциал», «агрессивные намерения» в рамках логики «баланса угроз»); написание аннотации работы и общее редактирование текста.

Ключевые слова: проект «Жемчужина мира», китайско-американские отношения, китайско-американское военное сотрудничество, китайско-американо-советский треугольник, реалистическая теория международных отношений.

Цитирование. Ли Мэнлун, Линь Ифу, Гулькова А. А. Китайско-американское военное сотрудничество в период холодной войны: программа «Жемчужина мира» // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 4, История. Регионоведение. Международные отношения. – 2025. – Т. 30, № 3. – С. 139–150. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2025.3.13>

Introduction. Since its foundation in 1949, modern China, like many other countries, saw military modernization as one of its main goals, which could be realized through enhancing military technology and combat capabilities and improving the construction of combat systems. It chose different approaches to achieve this goal at various stages of its evolution (whether it was independent research and development of armament technology, training of military talents, purchasing advanced armaments from other countries, or getting technology transfer from foreign regions). Initially (until the 1960s), it aligned with the Soviet Union in order to obtain military equipment and technical assistance. However, in the 1990s, China shifted its focus to independent research and development, choosing its own path of military modernization (although it still purchased some military equipment from other countries). The shift was influenced by changing international politics, well exemplified by the bankruptcy of the Sino-American “Peace Pearl” program. This program mainly aimed to ease Sino-American relations in the 1980s, when the United States gave China a green light in a series of military fields, such as arms sales and technology transfer [20]. But with the domestic political turmoil breaking out in China in 1989, the plan ultimately went bankrupt. China has focused on the import of technology rather than finished products and committed to the principle of independence and autonomy in military development, which has remained steadfast.

Although there have been many studies on military cooperation between China and the United States during the Cold War and after the end of the Cold War, there is limited research applying realist international relations theory to the development of the “Peace Pearl” program between China and the United States. Only some American news media have mentioned the program in their previous reports or publications. A monograph by Chinese scholar Zheng Guangchao analyses the “Peace Pearl” program as a case study in the context of a general overview of incidents in Sino-American military relations in the 1980s, and the Chinese magazine *Shipborne Weapons* examines the program in an article named “Development Gain and Loss of [Peace Pearl] or A Talk about Sino-American ‘Peace Pearl’” [33, p. 26]. However, these works are mostly based on the perspective of

Sino-American military cooperation and focused on the interaction between China and the United States in military, political, and economic fields. In terms of Russian historiography, numerous works have been written concerning the topic of the China-USSR-USA triangle in the late 1970s and 1980s, especially by Yu.M. Galenovich, a sinologist who deeply analyses USSR-China bilateral cooperation in his monographs [6], and A.T. Vorobyova and V.T. Yungblud [24], Russian authors who, in their article, examine the tensions between the three named countries from 1977 to 1980, focusing on the changes happening in the US administration that had a significant impact on the conduct of its foreign policy and, hence, the changes in the international arena within the “triangle.” However, attention to the case of carrying out the “Peace Pearl” program has not been made in these works. Thus, there has been a lack of literature examining the “Peace Pearl” program from the perspective of realist international relations theory. This approach aids in understanding the reasons behind the emergence and subsequent failure of the “Peace Pearl” program within an international context. It also allows us to conclude that China has primarily opted to absorb technological expertise while independently advancing its military modernisation. This paper formally focuses on the vacancy of this part.

The subject of the article is the China-US “Peace Pearl” program carried out in the 1980s within the context of the China-USA-USSR triangle. The object of the study is the analysis of the “Peace Pearl” program formation and collapse through the realist international relations theory perspective, taking into account changes in the international arena.

Methods and materials. Entering the 1980s, Sino-American relations, despite experiencing various twists and turns, saw a continuous deepening of cooperation between both parties. Many scholars conducted extensive research into the military collaboration between the two nations during this period. For example, *China’s Arms Sales: Motivations and Implications* by Daniel L. Byman and Roger Cliff [1] explores the characteristics of Chinese arms sales in the 1980s and discusses how U.S.-China military cooperation has had expansive geopolitical implications. David Finkelstein, in his article

titled *Military Dimensions of U.S.-China Security Cooperation: Retrospective and Future Prospects*, reflects on the history of military cooperation between the countries and argues that, for the most part, U.S.-China security cooperation has been mainly of a political nature and operationalised at a high level of strategic policy coordination [5]. *Research on Sino-U.S. Military Relations in the Late Cold War (1972–1989)* by Chinese scholar Liu Lu has reviewed the development of Sino-U.S. military relations and summarises the characteristics of the development of military relations between the two countries in the latter part of the Cold War [11]. However, the “Peace Pearl” program, serving as a representative event of Sino-American military collaboration during this era, has received relatively little attention in terms of theoretical analysis. Recognising this gap, this article focuses on the use of literature research methodology, which reads through, analyses and sorts literature in order to identify the essential attribute of materials [10, p. 179], and case study methodology, which entails an in-depth study of a social unit over a long period of time [16, p. 108]. By examining a wide range of historical documents and contemporary literature authored by scholars, including *Sino-American Military Relations in the 1980s: A Case Study of the “Peace Pearl” Project* by Zheng Guangchao [32], *The “Able Archer 83” Incident and the Reversal of Reaganism: Exploring the Origins of the Third Easing of U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Cold War* by Wang H. [27], and *Deng Xiaoping’s Selected Writings* published by the People’s Press [3], along with various documents released by the White House, this article aims to outline and summarise realist international relations theory in relation to the Sino-American “Peace Pearl” program. These phases serve as a basis for studying the bilateral relationships between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union, thereby enabling an analytical and evaluative perspective on the inception and conclusion of the “Peace Pearl” program within the framework of realistic international relations.

Analysis. Realist international relations theory represents a significant branch within contemporary international relations theory. It was formulated as a distinct theoretical framework in the 1930s. However, its roots extend further back in history, with its earliest traces

found in mediaeval and ancient philosophy [7]. This theory has since matured, encompassing five main branches primarily consisting of classical realism, neo-realism/structural realism, neo-classical realism, offensive realism, and defensive realism, each thoroughly outlined. In the early 1970s, classical realism lost much of its appeal, primarily due to the fact that classical realism was fundamentally a philosophical theory that did not align with the behavioural revolution happening at the time, which dominated American international relations studies. Consequently, the new “structural” realists, with Kenneth Waltz [26] as their prominent representative, attempted to construct a more scientific and rigorous theory of international politics. In terms of the current analysis, structural realism is deemed applicable for the examination of the Cold War interaction between the three states – USA, China, and USSR.

Since international relations theory primarily originated from Western developed countries, systematic discussions on it mainly come from Western scholars. Though, in addition to the original theory, there are also some relevant non-Western works to illustrate the realist theory of international relations. For example, in the Chinese academic field, scholar Yu Tiejun has a thesis named “Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, Neorealism – Internal Branches of Post-Cold War Realism Theory” [31]. Besides that, some scholars have analysed and developed the theory of international relations, such as “The Theory of International Relations” [30] by Yan Xuetong from Peking University in China.

For the further analysis of the “Peace Pearl” program and the intentional context, it is important to formulate some main characteristics of realism. There are four key features: 1) objectivism, which posits that international politics is shaped by unchanging patterns that persist throughout history; 2) collectivism, which asserts that individuals function primarily within society and their actions should be understood within the framework of a particular social context. In this sense, states are the principal and most crucial actors in international politics, perceived as rational, unified entities. Thus, while various factors at the individual and societal levels have had significant influence on the development and execution of the “Peace Pearl” program,

according to the realist perspective, the ultimate outcomes of these individual perceptions and specific events can still be attributed to choices made by states. For example, the response of the Chinese government to the domestic political turmoil in 1989 can still be viewed from the perspective of China as a unified actor's attitude and choice toward that event and the underlying political issues; 3) international society operates under a state of "anarchy," where there is no common supreme authority [26, p. 88]. In such a state, states must use all available means, including force, to safeguard their interests; 4) materialism, which means that realists attach the most significance to material factors, such as a state's resource capabilities and economic and military development. In terms of further analysis, these clauses may be applicable to the actions of China and the United States during the period under review. T.A. Vorobyova and V.T. Yungblud [24, p. 63] argue that particularly from the 1970s onwards, Mao Zedong's proposition of the "Three Worlds Theory" posited that there were three distinct worlds: the first world consisted of superpowers, namely the USA and the USSR, both of which China viewed as threats and sources of instability for the other worlds; the second world comprised developed nations, primarily in Europe and Japan; and the third world encompassed developing countries, including China [9, p. 417]. China mainly relied on realist assertions and a Realpolitik view of the politics, pragmatically seeking to promote its national interests, while the USA has also been traditionally pursuing its pragmatic objectives.

Having stated the main points of realism, it is crucial to introduce the concept of the theory of "balance of threats," introduced by Stephen Walt in his work "The Origins of Alliance" [25], which is complementary to that of Kenneth Waltz and suitable for analysing the relations of the China-USA-USSR triangle. This theory allows us to examine the reasons for alliance formation between states. The main explanations for the formation of unions are the following: 1) the balancing hypothesis, which posits that states unite for the sake of balancing the main threat, the most dangerous state, and 2) the bandwagoning hypothesis, which asserts that states unite with the state that is the main source of threat [25, p. 17]. These hypotheses are based on the definition of

an external threat, which means that the basis for the state's behaviour within this framework is an understanding of who poses the greatest threat. According to St. Walt, 4 main factors determine the threat level: 1) aggregated power (the more countries have common resources (population, industrial and military potential, technological progress), the greater the threat it poses); 2) geographical proximity (the closer the country, the greater the threat); 3) offensive potential (states with greater offensive capabilities pose a greater threat than those who are not able to attack because of geography, military positions, or something else); 4) aggressive intentions (if a state has aggressive intentions and is not inclined to change them in the future, then other states will more often seek to balance it) [25, p. 22]. In the context of the 1980s, the USSR's proactive foreign policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s could be seen by China as a more serious threat than its ideological differences with the USA, which allowed for it to ally with the latter and conclude agreements on military modernisation. In its turn, the USA, like China, threatened by what can be considered as the "aggressive intentions" and "offensive potential" of the USSR in terms of St. Walt's theory, changed their rhetoric from détente in international relations to more hostile actions, including actively involving China in the anti-Soviet alliance.

To conduct a study on the "Peace Pearl" program between China and the United States in the 1980s, it is crucial to consider the overall international context at the time and analyse the core national interests and demands of the relevant countries. Throughout the 1980s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union set the tone for the era, and the triangular relationship among China, the United States, and the Soviet Union played a crucial role in shaping their bilateral relations. However, from the early to the late 1980s, there were adjustments and changes in the framework of the Cold War and the configuration of the China-U.S.-Soviet triangular relationship. Therefore, within the backdrop of the Cold War, this article divides the 1980s into two time periods, the early to mid-1980s and the late 1980s.

Throughout the early 1980s, when viewed through the lens of realism in international relations, both the global balance of power and the

interactions between China and the United States created conditions for deeper cooperation between the two nations and laid the groundwork for the “Peace Pearl” program. In the early to mid-1980s, China-USSR relations still remained quite tense, which could be traced to the 1960s break-off of relations and be explained by a mutual clash of interests in military, political, and diplomatic domains. The roots of the deterioration, as it has been said, can be traced back to differences that emerged between the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Communist Party during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, particularly regarding Khrushchev’s report criticising Stalin.

By the early 1960s, ideological disputes arose between China and the Soviet Union, leading to the famous Sino-Soviet split. This open dispute over socialist ideology escalated the contradictions between the two countries. In March 1969, military clashes occurred on Zhenbao Island (Damansky Island), leading to a severe deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations, reaching a historic lowest point. Entering the 1980s, although the confrontation between the two countries somewhat eased, it remained formidable in nature. As the Russian sinologist Yu.M. Galenovich puts it, in 1979 Hu Yaobang, at the time a member of Politburo Standing Committee who later became CCP Chairman and General Secretary, managed to “reverse the official policy towards the USSR and gain support from the majority of the CPC authorities regarding the necessity to stop the USSR condemnation as a revisionist and military threat, and agree to start Sino-Soviet normalization”, but, still, the expert says that under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership only “decorative declaration of bilateral relations normalization” was possible, as the Soviet leaders were unable to understand “the depth of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping’s hatred and hostility” towards the USSR [6, p. 162, 163].

Moreover, in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and due to the tense relations between China and the Soviet Union, both countries deployed significant military forces along their borders. Additionally, the Soviet Union supported Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, effectively encircling China militarily from the north, west, and south. The demand to withdraw the Vietnamese troops from Cambodia

was also one of the main stumbling blocks in the Sino-Soviet relations that hindered normalisation [6, p. 168]. Beyond political and military threats, the Soviet Union also attempted to isolate China diplomatically in the international community by exerting control over other socialist countries within the socialist bloc. The basic principle adopted by Eastern European satellite states in their relations with China during this period was that any substantial improvement in relations with China would be contingent on an improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. This “Soviet priority” principle remained theoretically effective at least into the early 1980s [28, p. 31]. Hence, the overall tone of the China-USSR relationship remained hostile at the time, with the Soviet Union regarded as a threat to Chinese national security, which, in a realist perspective, predetermined China’s rapprochement with the USA in the 1980s in order to balance the threat. In terms of St. Walt’s theory of threats, the USSR at the time started to pose a greater threat to China, expressing more aggressive intentions and accumulating more offensive potential, which led to its need to balance against the Soviet Union in order to restore the “balance of power” (the basic concept of realism).

As for the Soviet-American dynamic in the early 1980s, due to the Soviet Union’s deep involvement in the quagmire of the Afghan conflict, the atmosphere of détente in their bilateral relations shifted to more aggressive rhetoric. Although at first, during this period, there was a slight easing of tensions in the U.S.-Soviet relationship, and leaders from both sides held multiple meetings and engaged in dialogue expressing a desire to ease the Cold War confrontation and conclude an agreement regarding arms reduction (they also cooperated on nuclear weapons control and the reduction of intermediate-range missiles), despite these efforts the competition and rivalry between the two superpowers remained intense. In spite of holding USA-Soviet SALT II negotiations on nuclear arms restrictions from late 1977 to 1978, there has been a shift both in the Chinese (after the 11th CPC National Congress in August 1977 a framework of a new political strategy has been worked out aimed at modernization, of the army as well, in which rapprochement with the USA had a key role) and American

(as two Russian authors state, personal factor of Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the President Carter's administration, who was a strong "oppose" of the USSR and lobbied the "China card", alongside the perception of the Soviet threat in the Third world countries: Soviet and Cuba troops presence in Ethiopia, "left" forces coming to power in Afghanistan and South Yemen and "leftist" revolution in Nicaragua, dictated the USA getting closer with China [24, p. 68]) foreign policies, which eventually led to their rapprochement, establishment of diplomatic relations and even orientation at creating military and strategic partnership between the two countries, particularly after the Soviet deployment of troops in Afghanistan in 1979. In Brzezinski's 1980 NSC weekly report to President Carter, Brzezinski indicated to the president that he could focus on expanding U.S.-China relations in late September or early October if the Soviet Union continued its operations in Afghanistan and if all went well with Bush's visit to Beijing [22, p. 7].

As for the Reagan administration, they adopted a more confrontational approach toward the Soviet Union than the previous administration. President Reagan openly declared his intention to "leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history" and labelled the Soviet Union an "evil empire" [13]. Furthermore, the United States initiated the "Strategic Defense Initiative" (SDI), commonly known as "Star Wars," aimed at competing with the Soviet Union in the development of ballistic missile defense systems. In October 1983, the U.S. Department of Defense, in its "Single Integrated Operational Plan 6" (SIOP-6), for the first time designated the political leadership of the Soviet Union as precise targets for nuclear missiles, including up to 5,000 critical Soviet targets, consisting of 25,000 military, 15,000 industrial, and 5,000 political targets [27, p. 136]. Overall, during this period, the United States continued to view the Soviet Union's military development as a real threat to its national status and security. Consequently, the U.S. embarked on a significant military buildup, adhering to the philosophy of "peace through strength." This, in the context of realist theory, predetermined its focus on China and the readiness to conclude military contracts, even stepping back on the Taiwan problem.

However, during the Reagan period the course of Zbigniew Brzezinski aimed at the total normalisation with China somewhat stalled, having stumbled on the Taiwan problem, with a key issue revolving around U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is of paramount importance to China, as it relates to its core interests. Any country establishing diplomatic relations with China is expected to recognise "One China" and acknowledge that Taiwan is an integral part of China. In 1979, during the Carter administration, the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which allowed the continued sale of weapons to Taiwan. In the early years of the Reagan administration, U.S. government officials, including President Reagan himself, expressed varying degrees of support for Taiwan, which was seen as a violation of the Shanghai Communiqué and the U.S.-China Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations [12, p. 1151]. In 1982, during an interview with China's Outlook magazine, Deng Xiaoping expressed his concerns regarding U.S. arms sales to Taiwan [29, p. 136]. On August 17, 1982, China and the United States jointly issued the "Joint Communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the United States of America," which outlined a step-by-step approach to address the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, leading to its temporary resolution. In this agreement, the United States reiterated its lack of intention to infringe upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, interfere in China's internal affairs, or pursue a "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" policy. Thus, this agreement helped temporarily ease the disputes (though not for a long time, as later that year the Chinese 12th CPC National Congress declared that "arms sales to Taiwan were a significant obstacle for Sino-American relations" [24, p. 77]) between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue, which in a realist perspective can be seen as a temporary freezing of the conflict for the sake of balancing against a more serious threat (in this case the USSR) [15, p. 31].

Therefore, in the face of these pressing national security concerns, cooperating with the United States became China's best option at the time, especially taking into consideration China opting for *Realpolitik* and pragmatically pursuing

only its national interests, which at the time were revolving around resisting the Soviet threat [24, p. 63]. However, from a realist perspective, China could not ensure its national security and maintain its national strength solely through cooperation with the United States. Instead, China needed to develop its own military capabilities to safeguard its national security interests and, on that basis, enhance its overall national strength. Starting in 1982, China's diplomatic policy shifted toward strengthening relations with "Third World" countries and seeking diplomatic independence [29, p. 140]. Before the birth of the "Peace Pearl" program, the United States did not impose overly strict restrictions on China's arms exports, including combat aircraft. China could easily import advanced Western third-generation fighter aircraft like the F-16 "Falcon," Dassault Mirage 2000, and others at very reasonable prices. There were no significant obstacles on the pricing front either. For example, the \$550 million allocated for the "Peace Pearl" program could have purchased approximately 24 American F-16/A fighter aircraft [32, p. 23]. However, China chose not to directly import advanced Western fighter aircraft, which would have rapidly improved its air force's combat capabilities. Instead, it opted for the "joint modernization" of the J-8II, a decision driven by the desire to enhance China's aviation industry's technological and manufacturing capabilities in the long term [14]. This step can be explained from a realist perspective of materialism imperative. As, in this sense, a nation's military strength holds paramount importance in its overall national standing. Relying on purchases from other countries or foreign aid for military production can only address short-term military needs. Hence, long-term enhancement of military capabilities must come from within because other nations are unlikely to transfer advanced military technologies and equipment that could significantly erode a nation's relative power.

The J-8II exhibited significant improvements in performance and essentially reached the standards of Western second-generation fighter aircraft. Originally designed to meet the requirements of countering the MIG-23, the J-8II's flight performance met the specified criteria. However, due to the relatively backward state of Chinese aerospace electronics technology at the time, the development of specialised

equipment for the J-8II, such as the Type 208 radar and PL-4 missiles, faced significant challenges. Consequently, the J-8II lagged behind in its capabilities related to target detection, tracking, positioning, and engagement, necessitating further enhancement of its combat capabilities [2].

Thus, the improvement in Sino-American relations offered opportunities for the improvement of the J-8II fighter aircraft. For the United States, assisting China could serve as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, expand the pro-American camp, and help balance the power dynamics between the United States and the Soviet Union. Therefore, providing military assistance to China became a strategic choice for the United States based on realist considerations. Actually, according to the 1988 American Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance statement, there were four considerations regarding the "Peace Pearl" program: "strengthening of China's self-defense capabilities; expanding interests in mutual opposition of Soviet expansionism in Asia; supporting a foreign policy which is non-threatening to allies in the region; and to support China's economic modernization program" [23, p. 273].

However, in order to maintain its national strength, and taking into account the sensitivities of countries in China's vicinity, such as Japan and ASEAN nations, which were strategically important to the United States, there were limitations to U.S. assistance to China. The U.S. Federal Military Supply Control Committee's document No. 81, issued in 1982, explicitly outlined restrictions on military exports to China, such as not allowing the sold military facilities to excessively enhance the PLA's strike capability [8, p. 70]. In addition to this, in National Security Decision Directive 120 on China, issued by the Reagan administration in 1984, it was also made clear that, while the United States would further emphasise its interest in joining forces with China to counter the Soviet Union in terms of regional strategy and military relations and reaffirmed its determination to help China upgrade its military defense capabilities, only a certain level of civilian and military technology would be transferred that was consistent with U.S. strategic interests and international obligations [21, p. 3]. This also explains why in the "Peace Pearl" program, the United States installed the AN/APG-66 radar

on the J-8II but refrained from discussing the inclusion of the more versatile and comprehensive AN/APG-68 radar, which was better suited for air interception. Overall, the reasons behind the “Peace Pearl” program’s establishment can be explained through the lens of realism in international relations, encompassing the need for the United States to expand the strength of its alliance due to the bipolar U.S.-Soviet rivalry, China and the United States pursuing their national security interests, and the program’s ability to enhance China’s military capabilities without undermining the United States’ absolute military advantage.

In the late 1980s, there was a significant transformation in the international landscape, and the favourable conditions supporting the “Peace Pearl” program gradually disappeared. Firstly, there was a major shift in the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Western camp, led by the United States, gained an advantage over the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, he implemented a series of political and economic reforms that significantly undermined the foundations of Soviet socialism, leading to ideological, political, and economic turmoil. The events of 1989 in Eastern Europe, known as the “Eastern Bloc Revolutions,” resulted in the downfall of communist governments in many Eastern European countries, greatly weakening the socialist camp. These changes in the balance of power reduced China’s strategic importance to the United States. In fact, as early as 1983, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz had stated during his visit to China that the basis of U.S.-China relations was no longer united resistance against the Soviet Union but direct contact and “common interest” between the two countries [18, p. 282]. However, at that time, the United States still sought cooperation with China due to practical considerations. Secondly, China’s regional security environment improved, and its national security interests received a certain degree of assurance [4]. Additionally, China’s economic interests and status were on the rise. While realism places national security interests at the forefront, other national interests cannot be ignored [19, p. 160]. In the early 1980s, China under the rule of Deng Xiaoping gradually shifted its focus

towards economic development. According to Yu.M. Galenovich’s opinion, Sino-Soviet normalisation became possible due to the Soviet readiness to succumb to Chinese requirements; the Soviet side showed the greatest flexibility and even softness after the 1960s because the authority had understood that without some efforts from the USSR part, China would not go for political rapprochement [6, p. 168]. In 1985, the Central Military Commission of China made a decision to prioritise economic development in defense construction. At a meeting with a delegation of the Algerian National Liberation Front party, Deng Xiaoping said that economic reform was China’s biggest experiment and that it was “the most arduous and overriding task for our Party and State at the present time” [3, p. 130]. In 1986, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced the withdrawal of 200,000 Soviet troops from Asia and initiated phased withdrawals from Afghanistan and Mongolia, albeit with some reservations regarding forcing Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia (this was the main obstacle for Sino-Soviet normalisation, as Deng Xiaoping firmly insisted on this demand, to which the USSR and Vietnam finally yielded in 1989 [6, p. 169]). At the end of 1988, China’s then Foreign Minister Qian Qichen visited the Soviet Union. This was the first official visit by a Chinese foreign minister to the Soviet Union since 1957, marking the beginning of the “semi-normalisation” of relations between the two countries [17, p. 8]. In 1989, Gorbachev visited China and met with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. Deng summarised the purpose of the meeting in eight words: “End the past, open the future” [3, p. 292]. For China, normalisation could also be viewed as the actual capitulation of the USSR in the “war of ideas,” as in M.S. Gorbachev’s pursuit of good neighbourliness with China; in the opinion of many Russian scholars, the Soviet core interests and views on the bilateral history of the two countries were undermined [6, p. 180]. Anyway, with this being said, the joint U.S.-China resistance against the Soviet Union, consequently, became a thing of the past, which resonates with the realist idea put forward by St. Walt that alliances built on the fragile ground of only needing to balance the common threat are very likely to fall apart as long as the threat disappears (as in the case of the USSR in the second half of the 1980s) [25, p. 31].

Lastly, the direct trigger for the termination of the “Peace Pearl” program was the political turmoil that occurred within China in 1989. According to the description in the Chronicle of Events of the People’s Republic of China, political turmoil broke out in Beijing and some cities in China at that time, but the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese government, relying on the people, unequivocally opposed and ultimately quelled the unrest, defended the socialist state power, and safeguarded the fundamental interests of the people [2, p. 94]. However, this turmoil led to a sharp deterioration in China’s relations with Western countries, especially the United States. The United States suspended most of its aid and cooperation with China, leading to the halt of the “Peace Pearl” program. Within days of the onset of the political upheaval, multiple military trade and technology transfer agreements between the two sides were terminated. The US President George Bush, during an interview at the White House, expressed his concerns over China’s domestic political situation and, later on, America announced sanctions against China. These included the suspension of all military sales and commercial arms exports between China and the United States, the suspension of visits by military leaders from both countries, and an agreement to reconsider requests for extended stays by Chinese students in the United States, as well as a reevaluation of other issues in U.S.-China relations. Regarding the significance of the “Peace Pearl” program, the U.S. Department of Defense requested the immediate departure of 40 Chinese technicians working for Grumman, effectively suspending the program. Although the program was later resumed through negotiations, the United States significantly increased the cost due to technical reasons, causing the overall cost to rise by 35 to 40% [32, p. 24]. Ultimately, China weighed the pros and cons and decided to abandon the program, bringing an end to the “Peace Pearl” initiative.

Results. Thus, the realist theory with its important provisions on the anarchy of the international environment, the concepts of “balance of power” and the “balance of threats” provides an insightful explanation of the international context of the 1980s, including the development of the “Peace Pearl” plan between China and the United States. The almost exceptional attempt

of such deep military cooperation between the United States and China in the mid-1980s can be explained by an increasing threat from the USSR to both China and the United States, due to such parameters as aggressive intentions and offensive potential from the realist theory. From the implementation of the plan, it is also clear that as soon as changes took place in the USSR, which affected the course of its foreign policy, the alliance of the United States and China in the military field came to naught. Later on, after the political turmoil in China in 1989, the USA returned to more hostile rhetoric towards China.

Other conclusions are concerned with Chinese experience. Although the Sino-American “Peace Pearl” program ultimately did not materialize as originally planned and resulted in some economic losses for China, it still yielded certain benefits for the country. Firstly, the fighter jets that underwent modification, as well as the personnel and technological exchanges during the modification process, provided valuable references and insights for China’s military aviation in terms of technology and production. Secondly, this event reinforced China’s determination to pursue an independent and self-reliant path for its modernization, rather than relying on other countries. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, China found itself in an intermediate position, often referred to as the “China-U.S.-USSR triangle”. In the 1980s China became the weight that could tip the balance of power, crucial for maintaining the equilibrium of international power dynamics. Therefore, China effectively leveraged its strategic position to obtain assistance from the United States and establish cooperation in various fields, including military, political, and economic matters. Hence, it has efficiently utilized its position within the bipolar international power balance to secure national interests.

REFERENCES

1. Byman D., Cliff R., *China’s Arms Sales Motivations and Implications*. Washington D.C., RAND, 1999. 60 p.
2. *Central Academy for Party History and Documentation (CAPHDR)*. Chronology of Events in the Peoples Republic of China: October 1949-September 2019. Beijing, People’s Press, 2019. 94 p.
3. Deng X. Deng Xiaoping’s Selected Writings. *Beijing, People’s Press*, vol. 3, 1993, pp. 130-295. (In Chinese).

4. Ding M. *Important adjustments in China's diplomatic strategy in the 1980s*. *National History Network of the People's Republic of China*, 2011. URL: http://www.hprc.org.cn/gsyj/yjjg/zggsyjxh_1/gsnhlw_1/baguoshixslwj/201110/t20111018_162328_4.html
5. Finkelstein D. *The Military Dimensions of U.S. – China Security Cooperation: Retrospective and Future Prospects*. CNA China Studies, 2010. 34 p.
6. Galenovich Y.M. *Ot Stalina i Mao do Putina i Xi* [From Stalin and Mao to Putin and Xi]. Moscow, Izd. dom VKN, 2020. 416 p.
7. Hong Y. Realist International Relations Theory: An Enduring Mainstream Paradigm. *Lishi Jiaoxue Wenti* [History Teaching Issues], 2004, no. 4, pp. 44-51.
8. Kenny H. *Underlying Patterns of Arms Sales to China, World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1986*. U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1987. 70 p.
9. Kissinger H. *On China*. The Penguin Press, New York, 2011. 840 p.
10. Lin G. *Higher Education Research Methodology – Literature Method*. *International Education Studies*, 2009, vol. 2, no. 4, 179 p.
11. Liu L. *Research on Sino-US Military Relations in the Late Cold War (1972–1989)*. Shandong Normal University, 2016. 51 p.
12. Lukin V. Relations Between the U.S. and China in the 1980s. *Asian Survey*, 1984, vol. 24, no. 11, pp. 1151-1156. DOI: 10.2307/2644149
13. *Milestones, U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1981–1991*. *Office of the Historian*, 2017. URL: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations>
14. Newdick T. *Remembering the Time Grumman Helped Craft a Modern Fighter For China*. *The War Zone*, April 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/40396/the-u-s-once-helped-china-develop-a-modern-jet-fighter>
15. Nie Y. *Analysis of Stephen Walt's Defensive Realism Theory*. Shandong Normal University, 2023. 31 p.
16. Priya A. Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application. *Sociological Bulletin*, 2021, vol. 70, no. 1, pp. 94-110.
17. Qian Q. Ending the Past, Opening up the Future – Recollections of Comrade Deng Xiaoping's Strategic Decision on Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations. *New China's Diplomatic Storms*, *World Knowledge Publishing House*, 1999, no. 5, pp. 6-11. (In Chinese).
18. Song L., Gong X. *China-U.S. Heads of State Diplomacy Facts*. Beijing, Economic Daily Press, 1998. 282p. (In Chinese).
19. Song W. Rethinking the Paradigm and Core of Realism. *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economy and Politics], 2023, no. 8, pp. 143-162.
20. Stilwell David R. *U.S.-China Bilateral Relations: The Lessons of History*. USC US-China Institute, December 12, 2019. URL: <https://china.usc.edu/david-r-stilwell-us-china-bilateral-relations-lessons-history-dec-12-2019>
21. The White House. "Visit to the United States of Premier Zhao Ziyang". *Digital National Security Archive*. Item Number: PR01513, January 9, 1984, pp. 1-3.
22. The White House, Memorandum for President Carter from Zbigniew Brzezinski. "NSC Weekly Report no. 149: Foreign Policy and the Elections," Secret, August 7, 1980. 9 p.
23. *United States Congress, Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Programs*, Washington: GPO, 1988. 273 p.
24. Vorobyova T.A., Yungblud V.T. Relations within «Triangle» USA – USSR – China at the End of Détente (1977–1980). *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 2019, no. 1 (64), pp. 59-82. DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2019-1-64-59-82
25. Walt St.M. *The Origins of Alliance*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987. 321 p.
26. Waltz K.N. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979. 88 p.
27. Wang H. The «Able Archer 83» Incident and the Reversal of Reaganism: Exploring the origins of the third easing of U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Cold War. *Meiguowenti Yanjiu* [American Studies], 2017, no. 1, pp. 126-150, 223-224.
28. Wang J., Tai Y. From Reconciliation to Alienation – Relationships Between China and Eastern European countries in the late 1980s. *Lengzhan Guojishi Yanjiu* [Cold War International History Research], 2012, no. 1, pp. 27-55.
29. Xiang D. *Adjustment and Stability*. *Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, 2023. 136 p. DOI: 10.27479/d.cnki.gzgcd.2021.000011
30. Yan X. Theory of International Relations of Moral Realism. *International Studies*, 2014, no. 5, pp. 102-130.
31. Yu T. Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism. *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economy and Politics], 2000, no. 1, pp. 43-51.
32. Zheng G. Sino-American Military Relations in the 1980s: A Case Study of the "Peace Pearl" Project. *MA Thesis*. China, Changchun, 2012, pp. 23-24. (In Chinese).
33. Zhong Q., Lizyu [Pearl of Peace] Discussion on the Pros and Cons of Development. *Jianzai Wuzi* [Shipborne Weapons], 2005, no. 9, pp. 26-29.

Information About the Authors

Menglong Li, Candidate of Sciences (History), Associate Professor, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University, Qianjin St, 2699, 130012 Changchun, China, limenglong@jlu.edu.cn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3087-5417>

Yifu Lin, Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, 999077 Hong Kong, China, linyf9921@mails.jlu.edu.cn, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9477-5829>

Aleksandra A. Gulkova, Undergraduate Student, Faculty of International Relations, International Institute for Energy Policy and Diplomacy, MGIMO University, Prosp. Vernadskogo, 76, 119454 Moscow, Russian Federation, Alexandra.gulkova@yandex.ru, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4849-1844>

Информация об авторах

Мэнлун Ли, кандидат исторических наук, доцент, институт международных и общественных отношений, Цзилиньский университет, ул. Цяньцзинь, 2699, 130012 г. Чанчунь, Китай, limenglong@jlu.edu.cn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3087-5417>

Ифу Линь, аспирант, факультет социальных наук, Гонконгский университет, Покфулам-роуд, 999077 г. Гонконг, Китай, linyf9921@mails.jlu.edu.cn, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9477-5829>

Александра Андреевна Гулькова, студент бакалавриата, Институт энергетической политики и дипломатии, Московский государственный институт международных отношений (университет) МИД России, просп. Вернадского, 76, 119454 г. Москва, Российская Федерация, Alexandra.gulkova@yandex.ru, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4849-1844>