

A Comparative Study of Political and Social Reforms Between China and the United States in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract. Since the end of the cold war, one of the most remarkable fundamental changes in the world's political and economic structure has been the rapid rise of China and its accompanying and emerging trend of "power transfer between China and the United States". The fundamental reason why the gap of comprehensive national strength between China and the United States has narrowed rapidly over the past two decades is the difference in the efficiency of domestic reform between the two countries, which is rooted in the evolution of mainstream political thoughts and social structure in the Post-Cold War era. Therefore, this paper tries to analyze and compare the above two variables and their impacts, focusing on the reasons for the different destinies of China and the United States' domestic reforms in the Post-Cold War era. And taking them as a new perspective to analyze the future strategic situation of China and the United States and the evolution of the international pattern.

Keywords: *reform, neo-liberalism, political-cultural split, consensus, social structure*

1. Introduction

Reform is the theme of China's political, economic and social development since 1978. At the same time, it is also one of the longest ideological and policy traditions of the United States in more than 200 years since its founding. [1] The author believes that, in the final analysis, it is because of the spirit of reform and the will to reform that China and the United States have been able to achieve historic and tremendous successes and achieve the country's comprehensive and rapid development and continuous upgrading of international status. [2] At present, as China and the United States become the two largest economies in the world with the largest economic scale and international influence, the competition between them is increasingly focused on the development model and the effectiveness of domestic governance. For large countries, especially super-large countries like China and the United States, good internal governance is the foundation of any foreign strategy, and the ultimate determinant of the former is the country's ability to reform. [3] Therefore, a thorough comparison of domestic reforms between China and the United States will help us to gain insight into the future trend of bilateral relations and even the evolution of the global strategic pattern.

Based on the above, this paper will try to provide a theoretical analysis framework with both macro-significance and practical value for the comparison of domestic reforms between China and the United States. In the following, the author will jump out of specific issues and focus on two fundamental factors that affect the domestic reform process in China and the United States: the mainstream political trend of thought and social structure (especially its evolution), to grasp the essence of the reform in the two countries. [4] Comparing the domestic reforms of China and the United States in the Post-Cold War era, and highlighting the main problems and characteristics of the current, so as to provide a clearer way of thinking for the analysis of future development trends.

2. Political-cultural Separation and the Stagnation of American Domestic Reform after the Cold War

Since the end of the cold war, domestic reform in the United States has almost stagnated. The author believes that the reason for this situation lies in the continuous "vicious chain reaction" between the change of American domestic political thoughts and the reconstruction of social structure in the Post-Cold War era. That is, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the United States has triggered a significant "triumphalism" political trend of thought, which solidified and

amplified the original shortcomings of the domestic system, leading to social differentiation and "polarization". The social structure has developed from the olive-shaped structure dominated by the middle class to the pyramid-shaped structure with the increasingly obvious gap between the rich and the poor.

Since the establishment of the Westphalia system in 1648, which marked the birth of the modern international system, the development of world history has been like a micro-cosmic big bang, showing the characteristics of constant acceleration. After entering the 20th century, human beings have experienced two world wars, the cold war and the Post-Cold War era of turbulence, crisis and evolution. However, in the most ups and downs of human society in a century, the evolution of the international system has a clear mainline, that is, the United States gradually gained world leadership, Westphalia system from the "European stage" to the "American stage". [5] Firstly, during the two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, the United States gradually established its leadership in the western world. Later, in the nearly half-century of bitter cold war confrontation, the status of the United States as the leader of the "free world" was constantly consolidated. Ultimately, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States, as a unique superpower, has undoubtedly become a global leader.

The growing experience of the United States has led to its self-confident nationalism. It's not difficult to find out if you look back on American history. For hundreds of years, especially in the 20th century, which was full of internal economic and social crises, ethnic conflicts and two world wars and cold war's abroad, the United States has been extremely successful in avoiding violent revolutions and military coups. And ideologically, it has not experienced the process of "breaking away" from the tradition, but constantly adjusting and renewing within the original framework, which is more stable than any other big country. The secret behind this development trajectory is that the United States has been adhering to "gradual" domestic reform. In short, American values and its historical practice have inherent dialectical unity, which also answers an important question of international relations in the 20th century from the side: why the United States prospered and why the Soviet Union declined.

Nevertheless, although the domestic reform of the United States has decisively helped it become the world's number one power, and ultimately won the Cold War, and achieved the status of the only superpower. [6] However, the end of the cold war has brought the domestic reform of the United States to a standstill for more than two decades, thus significantly weakening the international strategic position of the United States. The main reason is the vicious chain reaction between the change of political trend of thought and the reconstruction of social structure brought about by the end of the cold war.

First of all, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war have produced a strong "triumphalism" trend of thought in the United States, which has led to a serious imbalance in the social structure, both of which have weakened the long-standing reform tradition in the history of the United States. [7] More importantly, the US strategy in the Post-Cold War era is based on the wrong perception of the important historical event of the end of the cold war, which largely leads to the US "wasting the unique global opportunities provided by the peaceful end of the cold war", and [8] falling into the predicament of its own layout. In terms of the outcome of the cold war, the United States did become a winner. Unfortunately, the United States confused the "cause" and "result" of the end of the cold war with the victory of the United States and its system. It can be said that this misunderstanding of "the consequence is the cause" has produced extremely dangerous consequences: from this logic, the United States strengthened the domestic governance model and policy measures formed after the Reagan Revolution, and firmly believed its correctness and non-challenge ability, resulting in three "imbalances" of domestic economy and society.

First, in the Post-Cold War era, the United States has long been abducted by the "neo-liberalism" trend of thought, resulting in the imbalance of domestic development model. Reagan's economic reforms in the early 1980s helped the United States get out of the economic "stagflation" predicament caused by Keynesian policies in the 1970s and revitalize its economic vitality. Therefore, the United States began to adhere to the principle of free-market as the standard table.

And the end of the cold war made the United States further believe in the correctness of its "market fundamentalism": emphasizing the supremacy of the market and believing that market forces are omnipotent.

Secondly, since the end of the cold war, there has been a deteriorating economic structural imbalance in the United States. Similarly, because the "Neo liberalism" is dominant in the concept, the United States spares no effort to develop the virtual economy such as the financial and service industries, ignoring the intrinsic value of the real economy such as manufacturing, and ultimately leads to the "financial" and "virtualization" of the economy, as well as the industrial bubble and "hollowing out". [9] At the same time, "market fundamentalism" is extremely suspicious of the country, which makes the government relax market supervision, resulting in the proliferation of financial derivatives, the lack of social credit, and the gradual weakening of the concept of the rule of law, which has laid a huge hidden danger for the outbreak of the financial crisis.

Last but not least, there has been a marked imbalance in the social structure of the United States since the end of the cold war. It embodies in the sharp shrinkage of the size of the middle class, the growing gap between the rich and the poor between a few elites and the majority of the people, the growing antagonism between the two sides, and the gradual evolution of the social structure from "olive" to "pyramid", thus eroding the social consensus needed for reform. [10]

Undoubtedly, these realities have had a significant negative impact on the implementation of domestic reform in the United States. Because it has hollowed out the cornerstone of American democracy, the huge middle class, and greatly damaged the long-proud "social capital" of the United States, thus weakening the important factors conducive to reform, such as citizen participation, social trust and social ties.

Secondly, despite Democrat Barack Obama's entry into the White House in 2009 under the banner of "change" and his commitment to all-round reform, reform in the United States has been stagnant for more than five years in office, and this situation is still difficult to change in the short term.

The concept of "political-cultural splitting" was first proposed by Jin Canrong in his long article "Political-cultural splitting and the evolution of American political situation" published in early 1995. According to this article, the mainstream political trend of thought in the United States before the 1930s was classical liberalism, which believed in change but opposed revolution, advocated freedom and doubted authority, thus forming a development model of "small government, big society". However, the serious economic and social crisis that broke out in 1929 exposed the inability of the ideas mentioned above to solve modern social problems. As a result, the liberal policy system was discredited and the United States was divided politically and culturally. It is manifested in the differences and compromises between the emerging "New Deal Liberalism" (emphasizing state intervention in the economy) and the traditional "Classical Liberalism" (emphasizing the development of free markets, also known as conservatism). [11] From then on until the end of the cold war, this division was politically manifested in the alternation of democratic and Republican parties in power and the implementation of their respective policy propositions, while in the social and cultural fields it was manifested in the "tribunal resistance" of liberals and conservatives. [12]

Based on this, Wang Jisi, a well-known American scholar, once pointed out that the United States won the Cold War by relying on domestic changes. [13] However, the end of the cold war changed the situation dramatically. Similarly, without external constraints, the United States appears blind self-confidence in its strength and system. At the same time, the tolerance of domestic people to social contradictions and problems has also decreased significantly. For these reasons, the political-cultural divisions in the United States have further intensified, and the ideological opposition has become increasingly apparent, which has led to the polarization of political parties and social structures. [14] This has led to the impression that the United States is increasingly incapable of dealing with imminent social problems in the international arena.[15]

To sum up, it is not difficult to see that the intensification of political-cultural divisions in the Post-Cold War era has not only hindered the pace of effective reform in the United States but even once reached the level of endangering normal social management and social functioning. [16]

Therefore, the ideological trend of "victorian" resulting from the end of the cold war and the "vicious chain reaction" of "polarization" of social structure, ideology and Party politics. Together, it has contributed to the stagnation of domestic reform in the United States for more than two decades, and this situation will remain irreversible for quite a long time to come.

3. Leadership, Strategic Planning and Social Consensus: Promotion of China's Domestic Reform After the Cold War

As one of the most important events in the development of world history in the late 20th century, China's reform has a totally different historical background and time conditions compared with the United States. On the one hand, the "Cultural Revolution" caused serious setbacks and losses to the Party, the country and the people. On the other hand, the vigorous new scientific and technological revolution in the world promotes the world economy to develop at a faster speed. The gap between China's economic strength, scientific and technological strength and the advanced international level is widening, and China is facing tremendous pressure of international competition. We must lead the people to catch up with the trend of the times through reform and opening up. [17] At the political level, the Communist Party of China recognizes that in order to get out of the shackles of radical ideology and its destructive effects, it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive reform of the political, economic and social system. Because only in this way can we achieve the goal of "four modernizations" of national prosperity and national rejuvenation and strengthen our ruling position. [18] At the social level, ordinary people have long been tired of the anarchic disaster caused by the Cultural Revolution and are extremely eager to restore normal social order and economic production activities in order to improve their situation. [19] It is because of the urgent needs of these two levels that reform has become the overwhelming mainstream political trend of thought in China since 1978.

Of course, from the beginning of the reform to the beginning of the 1990s, there were many significant ideological differences and even controversies around the reform in China, so that people distinguished the political tendencies of different groups with the labels of "reformers" and "conservatives". In addition to the favorable conditions created by the mainstream political trend of reform consensus, China had a series of other subjective and objective motives at the beginning of the reform. For example, a peaceful international environment enabled reform and opening up to go hand in hand and complement each other, thus allowing China to introduce capital and technology from the outside world. The powerful authority of the Communist Party of China and Deng Xiaoping personally escorted the reform; the patriotic overseas Chinese provided indispensable help to the domestic reform and opening-up; the enormous vitality of China's huge population size and social structural changes (such as urbanization), and so on. [20] All of these have helped China's reform to start smoothly and gradually reach the hearts of the people.

However, as the whole reform of China in the 1980s is in the preliminary exploratory stage, while the reform has achieved remarkable achievements, it inevitably brings many contradictions and problems. [21] By the early 1990s, the international and domestic environment facing China had changed dramatically, and the above contradictions and problems were further magnified. As a result, with the upheaval of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and the resurgence of domestic political ideologies that contradict market-oriented reform (even once dominated), China's reform is facing the most difficult situation since 1978. In this context, Deng Xiaoping, as the chief architect of reform, stepped on the southward road in the spring of 1992 to ensure that China can continue to move smoothly on the road of reform. [22] In the "Southern Talk", which is of a historic turning point, Deng Xiaoping put forward many viewpoints that are still invigorating today, and made profound and forward-looking thinking on how to further promote reform in China after the end of the cold war.

Through a brief review of the reform history from 1978 to 1992, the author believes that China's domestic reform has entered a new stage with the end of the cold war and Deng Xiaoping's "South Talk" as an important turning point. Its symbol is to speed up the market-oriented reform and expand the opening up to the outside world to become an indestructible mainstream political trend of thought and national development strategy. It has consistently guided the direction of China's progress to this day. In addition, it is worth noting that the impact of the reform has gone far beyond the economic category itself, which has promoted the all-round development of China's politics, economy, society and even diplomacy. According to Ezra Vogel, a professor at Harvard University, its profundity is rare in Chinese and world history. [23]

Among the above changes in China in the Post-Cold War era, one important aspect deserves special attention here is the evolution of the social structure that has been and is underway. In the final analysis, it is not only the product of the reform but also one of the key forces affecting the future reform. Generally speaking, since the end of the cold war, due to the continuous improvement of the market economy and the government's granting more and more social rights to the people in the process, the changes of China's social structure show the following two characteristics. Firstly, the strong social vitality released by the reform promotes the development of China from the dual structure of "strong country and weak society" to "strong country and strong society" before the reform. Secondly, the high-speed urbanization brought about by marketization has created a huge urban middle class, so this brand-new group began to express their own interests and actively promote this appeal to become policy reality.

For China, the growth of the middle class not only adds weight to the smooth progress of reform but also challenges the reform process. The latter is mainly rooted in a series of current economic and social problems, and has been given more powerful power by the new state and social relationship of "strong country, stronger society". Specifically, on the one hand, the problems and contradictions in China's reform process during the Post-Cold War period have become the source of middle-class discontent, which has resulted in a large number of rent-seeking corruption and social injustice. [24] On the other hand, as China's politics in the post-Deng Xiaoping era entered the era of collective leadership, the authority of the government relative to social forces has declined. As a necessary response to the voice of society, China has gradually established a clear "government accountability mechanism". Therefore, it can be said that these important changes in China's politics and society put forward new requirements for future reform, because it will no longer be dominated and controlled by the political elite alone, but the result of the joint participation of the government and social forces.

To sum up, the reason why China can achieve a rapid rise in the Post-Cold War era lies in its successful promotion of domestic reform, and the decisive factor for the success of reform is the reshaping and further strengthening of domestic consensus on reform. At the same time, the ideological factors gradually faded out, and the main bottleneck restricting the reform was broken. Finally, the Communist Party of China, with its strong political authority and reform will, combines with the growing middle class to form a political-social structure conducive to reform.

4. Concluding Remarks: Comparison and Rethinking of Domestic Reforms Between China and the United States in the Post-Cold War Era

The fundamental reason why the gap between China and the United States has narrowed rapidly over the past two decades after the end of the cold war is that China's domestic reform has been pushed forward continuously, while the United States' domestic reform has tended to stagnate.

According to the analysis ideas of this paper, the comparison and summary of China's and the United States' domestic reforms in the Post-Cold War era should start from the following three dimensions: (1) the background of reform; (2) domestic political trends; (3) domestic social structure; (4) results. For the sake of clarity, the author lists these contents in the following table.

Table 1. Political Trends of Thought, Social Structure and Reforms in China and the United States after the Cold War

Country	Background	Domestic political thought	Domestic social structure	Result
America	Winning the cold war and becoming the only superpower. Power has reached its peak in history	Victory doctrine and increased separation of political culture. Ideological factors are highlighted, and consensus on reform is no longer in existence.	From "olive" to "pyramid" (the middle class is "hollowed out" and the social structure is polarized). Not conducive to reform	Reform stagnation Relative decline
China	Socialism has suffered major setbacks and domestic political disturbances. Reform is facing severe challenges	Market-oriented reform and opening-up. Desalination of ideological factors, reshaping and strengthening of reform consensus	The development of social structure towards middle classification. Favorable to reform	Reform and promotion Rapid rise

From the perspective of political trends of thought and changes in social structure, we can see the causes and results of the different fates of China and the United States' domestic reforms in the Post-Cold War era. Looking to the future, since China and the United States are at the crossroads of their respective historical development, the significance of reform for both countries is particularly significant. For the United States, on the one hand, the fact that domestic reform tends to stagnate in the Post-Cold War era has resulted in many significant strategic consequences, of which the most striking is undoubtedly that it has made the pace of "self-renewal" of the United States lag behind that of China, its global strategic competitor. And more importantly, for all the reasons mentioned above, the United States faces many obstacles to reversing its current predicament. For China, on the one hand, the acceleration of domestic reform in the Post-Cold War era ensures the realization of economic miracles and social progress, and significantly narrows the gap of strength between China and the United States, making it a newly emerging power attracting much attention. On the other hand, a series of problems in the process of reform accompanies the emergence of new social structure, which also makes the prospects of reform face many uncertainties. Under such circumstances, the future of reform in both China and the United States depends essentially on whether the political elite can use enough reform will and leadership to promote the formation of domestic political trends of thought and social structure conducive to further reform. This will be a fundamental test for the politicians of both countries, and a prerequisite for both countries to effectively solve problems, promote national progress and seize strategic advantages in the complex international and domestic situation.

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