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Skepticism Toward the U.S. and Political Backlash: The Evolution Mechanism and Prospects of Post-Cold War Transatlantic Relations

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Abstract. Since the end of the Cold War, Transatlantic relations have continuously evolved amidst the tension between "ally dependence" and "strategic autonomy." The emergence of European skepticism toward the U.S. and its transformation into political backlash have become key clues to understanding this process. This paper constructs a progressive transmission analysis model comprising four links: Structure – Emotion – Discourse – Policy (the SEDP model), to systematically explain the dynamic mechanism through which European skepticism toward the U.S. accumulates and translates into policy practice in the post-Cold War era. The study finds that structural pressure, through the interaction between elites and the public, and via emotional accumulation and discursive resonance, ultimately drives the formation of countervailing policies. Using typical cases such as France's Cultural Exception policy, the Iraq War, the Snowden incident, and EU defense autonomization as empirical evidence, this paper reveals the theoretical advantages of the SEDP model in explaining the evolution of Transatlantic relations. The research further suggests that future Transatlantic relations may develop along two paths: "Deepening Strategic Autonomy" and "Reconfiguration towards Multipolar Balance." Meanwhile, China needs to respond to the challenges posed by the EU's "de-risking" policy through institutional cooperation and "Third Space Diplomacy," thereby constructing an inclusive international cooperation ecosystem.

Keywords: Transatlantic Relations, Skepticism Toward The U.S., Political Backlash, SEDP Transmission Model, Strategic Autonomy

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Transatlantic relations have undergone profound changes under the interactive effects of structural transformation and the politics of emotion. Javier Solana, former EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, once noted: "We Europeans are instinctive multilateralists. We want the United States to commit more to multilateral solutions." [1] However, with the strengthening of U.S. unilateralist tendencies and the awakening of European autonomous consciousness, European societal attitudes towards the U.S. have gradually shifted from "dependence" to "estrangement." Skepticism toward the U.S. has spread across economic, security,

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and cultural domains, gradually transforming into politically countervailing actions with substantive impact.

Existing research on Transatlantic relations has significant limitations. The realist paradigm emphasizes power and interests but overlooks the role of emotional factors [2]; constructivism focuses on ideas and identity but lacks analysis of the mechanism through which emotions translate into policy [3]; neoliberalism emphasizes institutions and interdependence but struggles to explain the impact of emotions on rational cooperation [4]. To address these gaps, this paper proposes the SEDP transmission analysis model, systematically explaining how skepticism toward the U.S. translates into specific policy actions through four stages—structural pressure, emotional accumulation, discursive resonance, and policy backlash—via the interaction between elites and the public.

This paper first constructs the SEDP theoretical framework, then examines the evolution of European skepticism toward the U.S. from 1991 to 2023 in stages, supported by empirical analysis of typical cases. Finally, it prospects the future paths of Transatlantic relations and proposes strategic choices for China within the context of China-Europe relations.

2. Theoretical construction of the SEDP transmission analysis model

2.1. Analytical framework: structure – emotion – discourse – policy

The SEDP model views the evolution of skepticism toward the U.S. in Transatlantic relations as a dynamic process wherein "structural pressure is transformed into policy action through the interaction of social actors." This model consists of four progressive stages:

Structural Pressure Sources (Structural): Multiple pressures stemming from U.S. unipolar hegemony and the deepening of globalization post-Cold War in economic, security, and cultural domains constitute the root of skepticism toward the U.S.

Emotional Accumulation (Emotional): Individuals and groups develop emotions such as anxiety and dissatisfaction under structural pressure, gradually spreading from elites to the public, forming a societal emotional resonance.

Discursive Resonance (Discursive): Elites and media amplify emotions through discourse dissemination, fostering social consensus, and propelling emotions from individual feelings to collective action.

Policy Backlash (Policy): Driven by social consensus, policymakers introduce countervailing policies, achieving a reverse adjustment of policy towards the U.S.

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Table 1. Details the specific content, influencing factors, and mechanisms of action for each stage of the SEDP model

Transmission Stage	Specific Content	Influencing Factors	Function and Effect
Structural Pressure	Structural contradictions: unipolar hegemony, deepening globalization, security dependency	Economic dependence, technological control, cultural penetration	Generates pressure, laying the foundation for emotional accumulation.
Emotional Accumulation	Individual experiences and values, group historical memory and cultural identity	Triggering events (e.g., Snowden incident), media exposure	Skepticism spreads from elites to the public, forming the societal emotional base.
Discursive Resonance	Elite guidance, media reporting, social media dissemination	Media bias, discourse guidance, platform algorithms	Accelerates emotional transmission, creates public opinion pressure and social consensus.
Policy Backlash	Policymakers enact countervailing regulations or strategies	Public opinion pressure, interest balance, international environment	Alters policy direction, exerts substantive impact on Transatlantic relations.

2.2. Intermediary actors: the interaction mechanism between elites and the public

Traditional International Relations (IR) research often treats the state as a unitary actor, neglecting the interaction of domestic political actors. The SEDP model introduces elites and the public as key intermediary actors, whose interaction patterns determine the direction and intensity of policy backlash. Specifically, two typical patterns exist:

Emotional Resonance Pattern: Elites and the public are highly aligned in their skepticism, jointly promoting strong countervailing policies.

Strategic Divergence Pattern: Elites incline towards negotiation for strategic reasons, while the public demands strong confrontation, leading to policy compromise.

These two patterns alternate in Transatlantic relations, collectively shaping the complex landscape of European policy towards the U.S.

3. The evolution from skepticism toward the U.S. to political backlash (1991–2023)

3.1. Stage of awakening cultural autonomy consciousness (1991–2003)

The structural pressure in this stage primarily stemmed from the penetration of U.S. cultural hegemony. The U.S. disseminated its values and lifestyle through vehicles like Hollywood films and news media, squeezing European local cultural space. France introduced the Cultural Exception policy in 1993, explicitly excluding cultural products from the free trade framework, and supported its domestic film industry through screen quotas and financial subsidies, increasing its market share from 25% in 1992 to 40% in 2000 [5].

At the emotional level, elites showed significant anxiety. For instance, the German magazine Der Spiegel's 1999 cover story "America: The Uncontrolled Superpower" used the term "hegemony" 45 times [6]. However, public reaction was lukewarm, with support rates below 5%, forming a misaligned situation of "elite anxiety – public indifference."

At the discursive level, traditional media was elite-dominated, limiting public narrative. At the policy level, while the Cultural Exception policy achieved results in the cultural domain, it failed to extend to economic and security fields, reflecting a strategic divergence type of policy output.

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3.2. Stage of security trust crisis (2003–2008)

The Iraq War became a turning point for the collapse of Transatlantic security trust. The U.S. bypassed the UN to take unilateral action, causing serious divisions within the EU. France and Germany publicly opposed the war, while the UK and others supported the U.S., exposing the legitimacy crisis of NATO as a Cold War legacy.

At the emotional level, on February 15, 2003, over 3 million people participated in anti-war demonstrations across 30 European countries. Public trust in the U.S. fell from 65% in 2002 to 41% in 2004 [7]. At the discursive level, the rise of social media like Facebook began to break the elite monopoly on discourse, allowing public narratives to gradually emerge..

At the policy level, the EU published the European Security Strategy in 2003, proposing "effective multilateralism" and promoting the construction of rapid reaction forces. However, these measures still relied on the NATO framework, reflecting a contradictory progression of limited compromise and security autonomization.

The EU has not issued a specific policy paper on China since 2006, but its overall policy direction towards China is to serve its overall strategic tone in East Asia. Therefore, the EU policy paper "EU Foreign and Security Policy Action Programme for East Asia" issued in 2012 was used to summarize and summarize the policy.

In general, after several adjustments and adaptations to its China policy documents, the EU's overall strategy towards China has shown obvious features such as practicality, cooperation, coordination, and continuity. These overall characteristics also make the EU's China policy positive and constructive in its main tone, which has continuously promoted the steady development of China-Eu relations.

3.3. Stage of technological sovereignty contestation (2008–2016)

The global financial crisis and the Snowden incident highlighted Europe's structural dependence in the economic and technological domains. U.S. tech giants held an 80% share of the EU digital advertising market, and AWS monopolized 58% of the public cloud services [8], triggering deep European anxiety over data sovereignty and privacy rights.

At the emotional level, the Snowden incident triggered emotional resonance between elites and the public. The hashtag #StopSpying on Twitter reached a weekly dissemination volume of 500,000 [9]. The frequency of "data sovereignty" appearing in EU documents surged from an annual average of 3 times to 27 times [10].

At the policy level, the EU accelerated the legislation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which was formally implemented in 2018. This regulation is regarded as a landmark countermeasure by Europe against U.S. technological hegemony, reshaping the Transatlantic digital governance landscape.

3.4. Stage of institutional contestation (2016–2023)

After taking office, Trump pursued an "America First" policy, unilaterally withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Deal, and imposing tariffs on Europe, further intensifying skepticism. Although the Biden administration restarted Transatlantic dialogue, its Inflation Reduction Act was still criticized by Macron as "super-protectionist" [11].

At the emotional and discursive levels, self-media platforms promoted the decentralization of public narratives and transnational coordination. In 2021, the hashtag #StopDigitalColonialism

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averaged over 2 million monthly interactions, pushing the EU's Digital Markets Act to include "gatekeeper" restrictions [12].

At the policy level, the EU launched the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) in 2022 and proposed the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) in 2024, setting targets such as 40% of defense equipment collaborative procurement and 50% intra-EU procurement by 2030 [13]. This marks the transition of European strategic autonomy from concept to institutionalized practice.

Table 2. Evolution from skepticism toward the U.S. to political backlash (1991–2023)

Stage	Time	Structural Pressure	Emotional Characteristics	Discursive Mechanism	Policy Backlash
Cultural Autonomy	1991–2003	Cultural hegemony penetration, security dependency	Elite anxiety, public indifference	Elite dominance, traditional media	Cultural Exception policy
Security Trust Crisis	2003–2008	Iraq War, unilateralism	Surging public anti-war sentiment	Rise of social media	European Security Strategy
Technological Sovereignty Contestation	2008–2016	Technological dependence, data surveillance	Elite–public resonance	Upgraded social media narratives	Accelerated GDPR legislation
Institutional Contestation	2016–2023	Multiple crises, strategic autonomy demand	Transnational mobilization, emotional synchronization	Decentralized self-media	EDIRPA, EDIS introduction

4. Future prospects and China's strategy

4.1. Possible paths for transatlantic relations

The potential re-election of Trump in 2024 heralds the return of "America First" policies, posing further shocks to Transatlantic relations. Europe may develop along the following two paths:

Deepening Strategic Autonomy (2024–2030): Europe gradually reduces dependence on the U.S. by strengthening defense construction, integrating the internal market, and enhancing diplomatic independence. However, diverging member state interests, technological bottlenecks, and security dependencies remain major obstacles.

Reconfiguration towards Multipolar Balance (2024–2030): Europe turns towards cooperation with Asia, Africa, and other regions, promoting trade diversification and multipolarization of the international order. While facing U.S. intervention and internal divisions, this helps enhance Europe's global influence.

4.2. China's strategic choices

EU policy towards China shows a "de-risking" trend, strengthening economic defense through tools like the Foreign Subsidies Regulation and the Critical Raw Materials Act [14]. China needs to address these challenges through the following strategies:

Institutional Cooperation Frameworks: Participate in international rule-making through rule embedding and sub-national actor linkage to enhance discursive power. For example, promoting the construction of fair rules in areas like digital governance and climate change.

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"Third Space Diplomacy": Drawing on Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory, construct cooperative arenas that transcend the China-U.S. binary opposition. Specific paths include digital rule coordination, cultural narrative reconstruction, and civilizational dialogue, promoting practical China-EU cooperation in green, digital, and other fields.

5. Conclusion

By constructing the SEDP transmission analysis model, this paper has systematically explained how post-Cold War European skepticism toward the U.S. is transformed into specific policy actions through the four stages of structural pressure, emotional accumulation, discursive resonance, and policy backlash. This model not only compensates for the neglect of emotional factors in traditional theories but also provides a new analytical tool for understanding the dynamic evolution of Transatlantic relations.

The research shows that skepticism toward the U.S. is not merely an emotional phenomenon but the result of the combined effect of structural pressure and the interaction of social actors. In the future, with increasing uncertainty in U.S. policy and the deepening of European strategic autonomy, Transatlantic relations will continue to seek balance between "dependence" and "autonomy." China should expand cooperation space in China-Europe relations through institutional cooperation and "Third Space Diplomacy," promoting the construction of an inclusive global governance order.

This paper also has certain limitations, such as insufficient analysis of the role of sub-national actors and a lack of long-term data support. Future research could utilize large language models for real-time tracking of emotional transmission and integrate perspectives from the "Global South" to further expand the research boundaries of International Relations theory.

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