

Extended Abstract

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The examination of Sino-Romanian relations presents a compelling case study that illuminates how smaller states with limited natural resources successfully navigated the complex power dynamics of the Cold War era by establishing an extensively interconnected diplomatic network system. While scholarship has extensively documented the decentralization of the Cold War and demonstrated how smaller states occasionally superseded or manipulated major powers to achieve their objectives, the Romanian case—specifically within the Sino-Romanian-U.S.-Soviet quadrilateral framework—offers distinct analytical value. Unlike Cuba or Panama with their strategic geopolitical positions, Saudi Arabia with its abundant natural resources, or Singapore with its advanced economy, Romania's pathway to influence presents an intriguing paradigm of diplomatic maneuvering.

Romania's trajectory exemplifies the considerable diplomatic capital that "prestige" could generate in Cold War international relations, particularly evident in its engagement with China. The transition initiated by Romanian Communist Party (RCP) leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1962 aimed to transform Romania from a Soviet satellite state into an autonomous political, diplomatic, and economic entity. His successor, Nicolae Ceausescu, alongside Premier Ion Gheorghe Maurer, advanced this agenda, achieving not only independence but also maintaining viable relations with the Soviet Union, the United States, and China simultaneously. This diplomatic feat was exceptional during the Cold War, with Romania and Pakistan emerging as rare examples of nations capable of maintaining balanced relationships with both superpowers and China, albeit through intensive diplomatic efforts. This research demonstrates the delicate balance Romanian leaders maintained, confronting Soviet authority while addressing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) concerns about potential "revisionism," necessitating extraordinary diplomatic acumen to navigate multiple spheres of influence simultaneously.

The diplomatic investment yielded substantial returns. Romania's pursuit of independence garnered support from both China and the United States, each seeking to diminish Soviet influence over Romania. Despite reservations about Romania's revolutionary orientation, the CCP provided strategic support to counter Soviet influence while attempting to shape Romania's ideological trajectory. The United States, recognizing Romania's 1964 divergence from Soviet control, identified an opportunity to establish a precedent for Eastern European autonomy, initiating economic negotiations with the RCP. Through careful diplomatic calibration, Romania established itself as a significant political mediator by the late 1960s, with its Chinese connections particularly valued by both Romanian and Western diplomats. As detailed in Chapter Four, Western diplomatic representatives in Beijing regarded Romania as uniquely positioned to facilitate communication with and influence over China during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This diplomatic capital enabled Romania to become an essential intermediary for CCP engagement, evidenced by its role in the Sino-U.S. rapprochement and subsequent normalization efforts with various nations and political entities.

Romania's successful positioning as a political mediator elevated its status in Cold War dynamics. From the 1960s through the early 1980s, Romania commanded significant attention from Western powers and the Soviet Union while developing into a crucial CCP partner. During

Hua Guofeng's leadership, the CCP utilized Romania as a vital reference point for studying economic reforms. The tangible benefits of Romania's independent stance included substantial Chinese financial and industrial assistance throughout the 1970s, establishing Romania as a strategic counterweight to Soviet influence. American support further enhanced Romania's independence from Soviet economic control, by providing it the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status and a (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) GATT member. These factors contributed to Romania's accelerated development during this period.

Nevertheless, the RCP's strategy of leveraging diplomatic prestige for national development encountered inherent limitations. Romania's diplomatic influence was fundamentally tied to the specific international context of the 1960s and 1970s Cold War environment. During this period, the ideological divide between the East (particularly China) and the West remained profound and seemingly insurmountable. The adversarial relationship between these blocs largely precluded direct meaningful dialogue, creating a niche for a politically reliable, independent, and professional mediator trusted by all parties. However, the late 1970s witnessed a diminution of intense political competition between China and the West, enabling direct interaction. Simultaneously, the RCP leadership failed to capitalize on two decades of benefits to transform Romania's political and economic profile. By the early 1980s, Romania under the RCP remained—or had become increasingly—an inefficient authoritarian state with significant human rights concerns. Despite access to foreign technology, Romanian industrial output failed to achieve international competitiveness. Ceausescu's attempt to leverage historical prestige with CCP leadership in the 1980s proved ineffective without substantive material progress to support such claims.

More importantly, this study's broader significance lies in its illumination of how political intermediaries can emerge between major powers, particularly during periods of limited direct communication. Traditional studies often treated political mediators as an asset of major powers, which they could simply “pick mediators and use” when a major negotiation was underway. However, the formation of those trusted political mediators was in fact very complicated, and worth more detailed research. The development of mediators like Romania was not spontaneous but rather emerged through a complex process of mutual selection and interaction among various parties—including China, Romania, the United States, and the Soviet Union—over an extended period. Following the RCP's 1962 decision to distance itself from Soviet control, it required two years to establish mediation between the CCP and CPSU, five years to gain U.S. trust for message conveyance to China, and seven years to officially mediate the Sino-U.S. rapprochement. While varying international and domestic conditions influenced this timeline, this research identifies several critical elements necessary for the emergence or development of successful political mediation between major powers.

The evolution of Romania's mediating role during the Cold War was predicated on three interconnected theoretical elements, each contributing distinctively to its diplomatic efficacy. The first fundamental element centers on the theoretical concept of recognition of autonomy in international relations. This recognition transcended mere diplomatic acknowledgment, representing a paradigm shift in how major powers conceptualized Romania's position within the global system. The CCP's transition from viewing Romania as a “revisionist” state to recognizing it as an independent actor in 1964 marked a crucial theoretical departure from the binary Cold War framework. This reconceptualization proved particularly significant as it demonstrated how major powers could revise their ideological categorizations of smaller states without

compromising their own political principles. The U.S. approach, particularly from Johnson to Nixon, paralleled this theoretical evolution, suggesting a broader pattern in how superpower-small state relationships could be reconfigured outside traditional bloc politics. This dual recognition created a theoretical framework where a former satellite state could establish legitimate diplomatic agency, fundamentally prerequisite for any meaningful mediating role.

The second element, regarding the acceptance of strategic distance, represents a sophisticated theoretical development in Cold War diplomatic relations. This concept moved beyond traditional alliance theories, introducing a more nuanced understanding of diplomatic relationships where partial alignment could be more valuable than complete adherence. The CCP's eventual acceptance of Romania's neutrality, particularly after the 1964 rapprochement, exemplified how major powers could benefit from relationships that maintained deliberate strategic ambiguity. This theoretical framework proved especially valuable in Romania's mediating capacity, as it established a model where diplomatic effectiveness was enhanced by maintaining measured distance rather than diminished by it. The contrast with Sino-Albanian and Sino-North Korean relations is particularly instructive, demonstrating how excessive proximity could actually reduce a small state's utility in international mediation. Romania's case established a theoretical precedent for how calculated diplomatic distance could enhance rather than diminish a state's global influence, particularly in bridging ideological divides. The CCP's tolerance of Romanian criticism and neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split further developed this theoretical framework, suggesting that major powers could benefit from relationships with small states that maintained their diplomatic independence. This understanding directly facilitated Romania's role in normalization initiatives, as its credibility with multiple parties stemmed precisely from this maintained distance. The theoretical significance extends to contemporary international relations, suggesting how small states might navigate between competing major powers while maintaining diplomatic utility to all parties.

The third element, concerning Romania's commitment to political independence, represents a theoretical innovation in how small states could convert principled consistency into diplomatic capital. The steadfast positions of both Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceausescu generated a form of diplomatic credibility that transcended traditional power metrics. This commitment to independence, when combined with the previous elements, created a unique diplomatic formula where a small state's reliability and predictability became valuable assets in international mediation. The theoretical implications of this element are particularly relevant to understanding how small states can maximize their diplomatic influence despite limited material resources.

This study transcends a mere historical analysis of Sino-Romanian Cold War relations, offering instead a case study in big-small power dynamics that addresses fundamental questions about how major powers like the CCP can establish productive relationships with independent smaller nations, and how such relationships can facilitate communication and normalization between major powers. The Sino-Romanian case demonstrates how a smaller state can significantly influence China's diplomatic normalization process and assist in its economic evolution beyond Maoist policies. These insights may prove particularly relevant to contemporary Sino-U.S. relations in the 2020s, as direct political communication faces challenges and the potential role of intermediate diplomatic channels gains renewed significance.