



Navigating the India-US-China Strategic Triangle: Dynamics, Challenges, and Policy Implications

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Date of Submission: 28-04-2024

Date of Acceptance: 06-05-2024

Abstract

The research paper delves into the intricate dynamics of strategic triangles in the evolving international system, particularly focusing on the India-US-China triangle within the Indo-Pacific region. It explores how the historic shifts in global geopolitics, especially the thawing of US-China relations and the rise of emerging powers, have reshaped traditional power structures, leading to a more complex and multipolar world order. The paper highlights the strategic interactions and power dynamics between India, the United States, and China, emphasising the strategic partnerships, defence cooperation, and economic interdependencies that influence their relationships. It discusses how the US-China rivalry, India's strategic autonomy, and the deepening India-US partnership impact the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, it analyses the implications of key agreements and collaborations between India and the United States in deterring Chinese aggression and enhancing regional security. The research also delves into trade tensions, multilateral trading systems, and the economic relationships between India, China, and the United States, shedding light on the complexities and challenges within the triangular relationship. Ultimately, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the strategic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of the India-US-China triangle in the context of the shifting global power dynamics.

Keywords: *Strategic Triangle, Indo-Pacific, Sino-US competition, balance of power, India-US-China Relations.*

I. Introduction - Trends and Triangular Relations:

Operation Marco Polo had a pronounced impact on the US-USSR relationship, which had underpinned the prevailing bipolar world order. The historic visit of US President Richard Nixon to China in 1972, and the subsequent normalisation of Sino-American relations, represented a seismic shift in global geopolitics.¹ This diplomatic breakthrough ended the longstanding ideological and strategic rivalry between the US and China, which had been a key pillar of the bipolar system dominated by the US and Soviet Union in the post-World War era.

The thawing of relations between Washington and Beijing fundamentally altered the balance of power, undermining the rigid bipolarity. The US-USSR relationship was significantly strained by this development. The Soviet Union, which had previously viewed China as a partner in the communist bloc, faced the prospect of being strategically encircled by a US-China entente. This shift in the power dynamics compelled the Soviet Union to recalibrate its foreign policy and military posture, as it could no longer rely on the support of China in its ideological and geopolitical rivalry with the United States.² The rapprochement between Washington and Beijing, therefore, had far-reaching consequences for the US-USSR relationship and the broader structure of the international system at the time and forced the USSR to also normalise relations with the US, initiating a detente. It was in this setting, that discussions about a 'Grand strategic triangle'

¹ Gaddis, J. L. (1982). *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. Oxford University Press.

² Hanhimäki, J. M. (2004). *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press.



became more pronounced as China was able to influence great power relations between the United States and the USSR.

The traditional bipolarity that once defined the world order has given way to a more complex and dynamic structure. The concept of 'order' in international relations has been interpreted diversely by scholars, often centred around the distribution and concentration of power. The ascendance of China has sparked discussions on power transition, highlighting a discernible shift in the power dynamics, notably the perceived decline of the United States juxtaposed with the ascent of China. Concurrently, the emergence of 'middle powers' such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia, alongside China have signalled a trend towards power diffusion within the international system, challenging the traditional notions of power concentration and paving the way for a potential transition towards a multipolar world order. Therefore, the application of strategic triangles in a multipolar world order seems to represent complex dynamics that are distinct from a bipolar world order that was characterised by strategic shifts that were clearly understood in terms of strategic realignments based on power equilibrium between two blocs. The 'emerging powers' have led to the emergence of multiple strategic triangles within a region as these powers have a significant impact on great power relations between two powers.³ Apart from a transformed world order, the realities of the Cold War no longer represent the complex interdependent relationships that exist between states today.

In a globalised world, states are integrated with the world economy which has created economic interdependence between states. Economic power is equally crucial in the contemporary world, as it provides states with the resources to invest in their military, infrastructure, and social welfare. It also enables states to exert influence over others through trade, investment,

³ The US-Europe-China Triangle in an Increasingly Multipolar World (n.d.). [PDF] The US-Europe-China Triangle in an Increasingly Multipolar World. [online] Available at: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?groupId=252038&uuid=3e4a8021-c8c3-0064-581e-3def9dd112b8.

and aid.⁴ Additionally, the complex interdependence that underpins the world has challenged the traditional notions of a clear and fixed hierarchy of issues. Today, for individual states, different issues have become a priority that is contingent upon contextual factors that influence their national interests. For instance, the geographical location of a country would determine the abundance or absence of resources and determine security threats, both traditional and non-traditional, which determine its national interest priorities.⁵ Therefore, states have resorted to compartmentalising cooperation by collaborating with other states on particular issues independent of other issues. In this regard, economic relationships have been observed to work independently of security relationships. For example, there is increasing economic cooperation between China and the United States despite deepening competitive rivalry between them.⁶ This has given rise to a trend of 'issue-based partnerships' in the international system which was not as prevalent during the bipolar bloc politics of the Cold War.⁷ Therefore, the framework of a strategic triangle that existed during the Cold War is different from contemporary times where complex interdependence has perpetuated complexities in triangular relationships.

Apart from complex interdependence, every state is theoretically an autonomous entity, endowed with the capacity to exercise sovereignty within an anarchic environment. However, in practice, the ability of a state to exercise its sovereignty is contingent upon its relative power

⁴ India in the Emergent Multipolar World Order: Dynamics and Strategic ... (2019). [online] Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0974928419901187>

⁵ STRATEGIC TRIANGLES RESHAPING INTERNATIONAL ... (2023). STRATEGIC TRIANGLES RESHAPING INTERNATIONAL [online] Available at: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/54494/9781000613957.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Manoharan, N., & Timhna, (2023). Different partners, different reasons. Deccan Herald. [online] Available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/different-partners-different-reasons-1225185.html>.



vis-à-vis other states. Consequently, every state strives to maximise its power, thereby enhancing its capacity to exercise sovereignty and circumvent coercion by states with greater power.⁸ The subsequent development of state institutions within the former 'Third World countries', now comprising the 'Global South', has led to the strengthening of political consciousness among these nations to assertively pursue their national interests amidst great power relations. This reflects a departure from the historical power asymmetries that had previously constrained the Global South's ability to articulate and advance its priorities on the international stage.⁹ Apart from great powers, multilateral institutions like the United Nations, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), also equally shape the world order where the Global South has sought to leverage its collective influence to shape global governance and reorient the international order to better reflect their developmental needs and geopolitical interests.¹⁰ These countries have effectively forged triangular relationships concerning their emergence as strong independent states that are increasingly influencing great power relations while pursuing greater 'strategic autonomy' within a strategic triangle.

Therefore, the bipolar setting within which the theoretical framework of strategic triangles was initially understood, today, has evolved into an international system that is categorised by complex interdependence which has in turn necessitated a nuanced understanding of strategic triangles. In the 21st century, triangular relations are increasingly impacted by significant shifts in power that determine world order, complex interdependence that has led to the prevalence of an 'issue-based partnerships' model of foreign policy and the rise of 'emerging powers' belonging to the global south that push their national interests more assertively on the global stage.

⁸ Bull, H. (1977). *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. Macmillan.

⁹ Stuenkel, O. (2016). *Post-western world: How emerging powers are remaking global order*. John Wiley & Sons.

¹⁰ Hurrell, A. (2006). *Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?*. *International affairs*, 82(1), 1-19.

II. Triangular relationships in the Indo-Pacific:

The concept of a "strategic triangle" has been defined by Seongi Woo as "*an intimate and interdependent relationship of three states whose existence creates a series of incentives and constraints for cooperation and conflictual behaviours among those states. The three states struggle for their security and survival. Each state identifies the other two as belonging to the category either of a security provider or a threat.*"¹¹ The interdependence that is generated is in terms of foreign policy behaviour while pointing out a necessary condition that "interaction between two states influences and is influenced by the third party", insisting that the state relations within a strategic triangle are not often bilaterally determined.

The Indo-Pacific, emerging as a pivotal arena of geopolitical contention, has traditionally resisted adherence to hegemony or a singular order. For example, in the aftermath of the 1962 war with China, India turned to the United States for support and later turned to the Soviet Union as a response to the deepening Pakistan-US alliance. While the bipolar global order prevailed predominantly in the Western sphere, offering a degree of predictability concerning great power dynamics and relatively stable alliance systems, a frequently overlooked perspective from the Global South suggests that bipolarity presented an unpredictable landscape for third-world nations.¹² This unpredictability was exacerbated by fragile state institutions, authoritarian regimes, limited development, and conflicts often serving as proxies for the two superpowers. It was within this complex context that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gained prominence, serving as a third pole outside the bipolar rivalry, refusing alignment with either superpower. The contemporary Indo-Pacific region bears a significant legacy of NAM. States like India as a result of this historical ideological conviction are inclined to pursue independent foreign policies in their interest.¹³ In accordance with this, India and

¹¹ Woo, S. (2013). *Strategic Triangles in East Asia*. *The Pacific Review*, 26(2), 125-143.

¹² Hurrell, A. (2006). *Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?*. *International affairs*, 82(1), 1-19.

¹³ The Atlantic. (2023). *What Limits Any U.S. Alliance With India Over China*. Retrieved from



the United States have not formed an alliance but have developed their partnership to address their respective security concerns and needs. An autonomous foreign policy stance in international relations alongside significant interdependence between three influential powers, makes a strong case for triangular relations as each of the states strives to secure its interests, ensure its survival, and expand its influence. The intricate strategic dynamics between India, the United States, and China represent a complex triangular relationship that is bound to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

The rise of China as a global power, supported by rapid economic growth, technological advancements, and assertive foreign policy is perceived as a challenge to the unipolar world order led by the United States. Furthermore, the relative decline of the United States in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, coupled with the evolving dynamics of international trade, has accentuated the narrative of a power transition and the deepening rivalry between the US and China for global influence.¹⁴ The US-China rivalry, which has emerged as the defining feature of the 21st century, has found its expression in the geopolitical construct of the 'Indo-Pacific' as the locus of power shifts from the West to the East. The shift in the global balance of power has prompted the United States to recalibrate its strategic focus and forge closer ties with its regional allies and partners, in an effort to counter China's growing influence and maintain its preeminence in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ It is within the context of the US-China relationship that we intend to look at power dynamics from a theoretical lens of a strategic triangle in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on the India-US-China triangle.

When President Xi articulated China's intention to enhance engagement with its neighbouring countries, it signified a notable departure from its previously held non-interventionist stance over the preceding decade.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/03/india-relations-us-china-modi/673237/>

¹⁴ Layne, C. (2012). This time it's real: The end of unipolarity and the Pax Americana. *International studies quarterly*, 56(1), 203-213.

¹⁵ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2010). The gathering storm: China's challenge to US power in Asia. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(4), 381-396.

China's partnerships had largely been transactional until President Xi assumed office. The initiation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) posed a direct challenge for India, disrupting its conventional approach due to the implications of CPEC under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on India's territorial integrity.¹⁶ Subsequent to this development, New Delhi unequivocally stated its non-participation in the BRI, a position also endorsed by the United States. The escalating divergences between India and China appeared to foster a deepening partnership between India and the US. China, lacking direct maritime access to the West, finds itself encircled by US allies and partners, viewing the burgeoning India-US alliance as a facet of America's containment strategy in Asia.¹⁷

The change in US leadership with Donald Trump assuming the presidency as the 45th President ushered in an era of heightened competition between China and the United States. Under Trump's administration, the US adopted a transactional approach towards its international engagements, triggering concerns in Delhi. The ensuing friction between the two democracies manifested in tariff disputes, although adept bureaucratic interventions towards the end of Trump's tenure mitigated some tensions. However, events such as the Doklam border crisis in 2017 and the Galwan border dispute in 2020 appeared to signal a shift in India's foreign policy approach.¹⁸ New Delhi appears inclined towards addressing its dependencies and long-term strategic development needs through partnerships, leading to a wave of privatisation and liberalisation across various sectors in the country in line with the strategy of internal balancing. Notably, two key aspects warrant consideration. Firstly, the historical

¹⁶ Bajoria, J. (2018). China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-cpec>

¹⁷ Mohan, C. R. (2018). India and the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/06/26/india-and-united-states-in-indo-pacific-pub-76694>

¹⁸ Pant, H. V. (2020). India-China Relations: The Border Issue. Observer Research Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-china-relations-the-border-issue/>



foundation of US-India relations rooted in developmental cooperation has rapidly evolved into a deepening defence partnership in response to China's assertive military posturing in Asia and expanding influence.¹⁹ Secondly, the ongoing efforts to develop critical sectors such as defence, space, and technology in India, followed by the opening up of these domains to private entities, have been accelerated through swift legislative and policy actions, where India seeks to leverage its external partnerships. In the India, United States and China strategic triangle, balancing and deterrence dynamics are largely driven by India-US hedging against China.

1. India-US-China Strategic Triangle:

The deepening defence cooperation between India and the United States has facilitated aggregation of capabilities to deter the growing Chinese aggression in the region as amplified by the four foundational agreements signed between the two democracies - the "General Security of Military Agreement" (GSOMIA) (2002), the "Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Exchange Agreement (LEMOA) (2016), the "Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement" (COMCASA) (2016), and the "Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement" (BECA) (2020).²⁰ The foundational agreements will enhance defence collaboration and undoubtedly position India strategically advantageous as they enhance interoperability between the United States and India. In 2018, the United States implemented modifications to its export control regulations, benefiting India by streamlining the transfer of technologies and defence equipment. Notably, the United States, the largest arms exporter globally, upgraded India, the largest arms importer, to Strategic Trade Authorization-1 (STA-1) status, aligning it with the United States' NATO allies. This advancement enables India to procure highly

advanced and sensitive technologies from the U.S., enhancing the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) partnership which was adopted in 2012 for the co-production and co-development of military equipment.²¹

In the Indo-Pacific, there are evident strategic convergences between India and the United States, as they seek to address shared security challenges and promote a favourable balance of power in the region. Despite this cooperation, issues of trade have remained a point of contention between the two democracies, who have often taken opposing positions at the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 2019, the Trump administration terminated India's preferential trade status under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), a program dating back to the 1970s that allowed goods from developing nations to enter the U.S. market duty-free.²² President Trump cited India's alleged failure to provide "fair and reasonable access" to its market as the justification for this decision. Shortly after, India retaliated by imposing tariffs on twenty-eight American products, in response to the U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminium that had been imposed in 2018.²³

China and India have found common ground in their support for strengthening the rules-based multilateral trading system, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). The two nations have reinforced their commitment to collaboratively work towards open and inclusive trade arrangements that will benefit all countries.

¹⁹ Brookings Institution. (n.d.). The U.S.-India Relationship and China. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-u-s-india-relationship-and-china/>

²⁰ Parmar, S. S. (2021). A Contemporary Assessment of the Maritime Impact of the India-US Foundational Agreements. National Maritime Foundation. Available at: <https://maritimeindia.org/a-contemporary-assessment-of-the-maritime-impact-of-the-india-us-foundational-agreements/>

²¹ Moneycontrol. (2018). US gives India STA-1 status: Here's all you need to know about it. Available at: <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/us-gives-india-sta-1-status-heres-all-you-need-to-know-about-it-2790601.html>

²² Chaudhury, D. R. (2019, June 6). Trump terminates India's preferential trade status under GSP. The Economic Times. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/trump-terminates-indias-preferential-trade-status-under-gsp/articleshow/69688950.cms>

²³ Bhatia, R. (2020). India-US Trade Tensions: Causes and Consequences. Observer Research Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-india-us-trade-tensions-beyond-trade-imbalances-61077>



India's imports from China have experienced a substantial increase, reaching a value of \$101 billion in 2023-24, compared to approximately \$70 billion in 2018-19 as China's share of India's industrial goods imports rose from 21% to 30% over a 15-year period according to a report by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI).²⁴ The GTRI study also predicts that Chinese imports will continue to rise significantly in the coming years. Furthermore, China is the top supplier in eight major industrial sectors, including machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, which contradicts the common perception that Chinese imports are primarily focused on the electronics sector.²⁵ India and China remain locked in profound disagreements and a destabilising border dispute, fueling their fierce competition. China's ascent is perceived as a threat by India, particularly due to China's expanding presence in India's neighbourhood and its close ties with India's adversary, Pakistan. Consequently, India is compelled to pursue strategies aimed at balancing China, leading to efforts in internal balancing through the enhancement of both conventional and non-conventional capabilities. Additionally, India is forging strategic partnerships with like-minded nations such as the USA, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia, as evidenced by its involvement in the QUAD, for external balancing. This policy of multiple alignments empowers India with increased bargaining leverage in the region.²⁶

The economic relationships between states are a crucial component of strategic triangles. While trade remains an important factor in the India-China dynamic because of the huge asymmetry in trade between India and China that has constrained India's willingness to escalate its balancing efforts beyond a certain limit, it has not been a significant constraint in the China-US dynamics. China has established a significant

presence in the United States through trade and investment, emerging as a key trade partner for the US. The US exports to China in 2022 totalled \$153.8 billion, with imports from China at \$536.8 billion. The trade deficit with China in 2022 was \$382.9 billion, representing 7.5% of total US exports and 16.5% of total imports to China.²⁷

The United States is cautious of Chinese intentions and increasingly sees China as a competitor in both military and diplomatic realms. In contrast, China has been forthright in expressing its intentions to alter the international order. The 2022 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (2022 CMPR) document highlights China's aggressive development of A2AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) capabilities through a "counter-intervention" strategy aimed at dissuading, deterring, or defeating third-party intervention in the Asia-Pacific region. The report outlines various capabilities, including precision strike capability and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) by the Strategic Support Force, an early warning radar network, diverse surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, ballistic and cruise missile systems, hypersonic weapons, and aviation forces capable of long-range operations beyond the First Island Chain.²⁸

III. Conclusion:

Strategic triangles arising out of great power relations have the ability to shape the world order. Likewise, the triangular relations are also shaped by the international system, multilateral institutions of that time combined with the historical experience of individual states. Indo-pacific as a theatre has had a distinct Cold War experience that also influences the behaviour of the residential powers of the region. The triangular dynamics take root as the Chinese sphere of

²⁴ The Hindu. (2024, April 29). Up 2.3 times in 15 years, India's Chinese import bill to rise further. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/up-23-times-in-15-years-indias-chinese-import-bill-to-rise-further/article68118302.ece>

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Mohan, C. R. (2020). India's China Challenge: A Moment of Reckoning?. Observer Research Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-china-challenge-a-moment-of-reckoning-65116/>

²⁷ Bureau of Industry and Security. (2022). U.S. Trade with China 2022. Available at: <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/country-papers/3268-2022-statistical-analysis-of-u-s-trade-with-china/file>

²⁸ Department of Defense. (2022). 2022 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. [online] Available at: <https://navyleaguehonolulu.org/maritime-security/ewExternalFiles/2022-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf>



influence and the Indian sphere of influence make up the Indo-Pacific theatre where the United States through its alliances and partnership remains relevant. India alone may not present a substantial challenge to China, but its strategic partnerships, particularly its military collaborations with nations allied to the US like Japan, are perceived by China as a significant limitation on its regional aspirations. The competition between the US and China in military affairs has spilt over into economic ties, which was previously seen as a driver of cooperation. As the economic gap between China and the US narrows, their economic ties may not serve as a major constraint. In a strategic triangle, a bilateral relationship can often be more consequential than the other two as symmetries can exist among three actors in such a triangle. In the India-US-China strategic triangle, the notable imbalance lies on India's side. The degree of India-US balancing will face a substantial test in the event of a crisis between the US and China, as India will need to navigate between maintaining its strategic autonomy and upholding the credibility of its partnership with the US to serve as a significant deterrent, while ideally aiming to avoid involvement in any conflict altogether.

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