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INDIA-CHINA AND UNITED STATES: TRIANGLE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

The post-Cold War global order has witnessed the emergence of a distinctive pattern of triangular interaction among India, China and United States during the 1990s, which further developed after the events of September 11, 2001. The war against terrorism provided a common platform for the three powers to discuss matters of strategic importance. There has been a fundamental reassessment in each of these three countries of the relative importance of the other actors in the political triangle and accordingly each power is attempting to restructure its foreign policy priorities without jeopardizing its national interests.

Asian politics today has become increasingly complicated as there are constant changes in the variables of a triangular relationship: China, the US and Russia; or China, Japan and the US; or China, Russia and India; or India, China and Pakistan. But at present the global order is focused on the constant interactions among India, China and the US. As the confrontational atmosphere of the Cold War has largely receded, the strategic interactions between these three countries have become the subject of intense analysis by interested observers. There are two defining characteristics of the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region after the end of Cold War: First, the United States has become the only superpower in the world today. It is also the most important external power in Asia, and plays a key role in Asian security. Secondly, old rivals, China and India have emerged as strong regional powers, as evidenced by impressive economic growth, the development of nuclear arsenals, and demonstrated ambitions for influence in the Pacific and South Asian regions. While China's role as an economic and geo-strategic player is more widely recognized, India is slowly emerging as a regional competitor to be taken seriously. The events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have further succeeded in providing new incentive to bring these two countries together to share common security concerns. Further with the unprecedented U.S. Military presence in South Asia due to the war against terrorism, a third player—the world's remaining superpower—is now more closely involved in the historic Sino-Indian rivalry.



The concept of a strategic triangle is now familiar to analysts of international affairs (Harding, 2004: 321). It refers to a situation in which three major powers are sufficiently important to each other that a change in the relationship between any two of them has a significant impact on the interests of the third. The greater that impact, actual or potential, the greater is the significance of the triangular relationship.

With the rise of the Indian and the Chinese power in the twenty-first century, it is unclear what pattern the triangle will evolve into; some speculate about a U.S-India alignment against a rising China; others emphasize about a Sino-Indian cooperative framework against the uni-polar world order led by the U.S. (Harding, 2004: 323). So far, there has been no consider identifiable pattern. As the Cold War ended and the former Soviet Union collapsed, India has restructured its own international relationships, attempting to reduce tensions with China and build concrete ties with the United States. China, on the other hand, has sought to improve relations with India, break off from its strategic encirclement policy and maintain a stable relationship with the United States despite its serious differences on the human rights and Taiwan issue.

According to Henry Kissinger, the most advantageous position in the strategic triangle is the 'pivot' role which maintains amity with the other two players (the wings) while pitting them against each other (Wu, 1996: 26-52). In this case-study, the US skillfully maintains the 'pivot' position keeping a delicate balance between its relations with the two wings, India and China and deriving maximum benefits as the latter two engage in a rivalry to outbid each other. It may be that the US becomes too complacent regarding relations with both India and China. In order to resist US supremacy, India and China make a formal alliance which is unrealistic in the current international political climate. Tension has slowly been building up between the two Asian giants after the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama went ahead with plans to visit a heavily militarized Tibetan Buddhist area in northeast India in November 2009. The academic and media commentators have been further inciting the divergence of opinions. "Is China itching to wage war on India?" was an immediate response of Professor Brahma Chellaney of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, India (Chellaney, 2009). Reports have also appeared in Chinese state media alleging that India was moving troops and fighter aircraft to the northeast, specifically into Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Close to 400 incidents of border intrusion have occurred in the last three years, according to the Indian Defence Yearbook published in February 2009 with over 140 in 2007 and many more in 2008 (Arora, 2009). Is there a possibility of both India and China competing against each other to improve their respective strategic positions and grab the 'pivot' position in the strategic triangle? The course of evolution of the triangular relationship involving India, China and the United States of America has a

significant impact on the current global configuration of power and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

THE STUDY OF TRIANGLES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS :

The metaphor of a triangle has become increasingly popular in the historical-analytical studies of the big-power relations (Zha, 2001: 117). A triangle views the evolution of relations among three nation-states as an inseparable whole. It implies that one of the three actors adopts a particular foreign policy decision toward a second actor either as a result of or as an effect of managing its relations with the third actor. During the Cold War, relations among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China were considered to form a “Great Triangle”. None of the three actors could act independently toward either of the other two without taking into consideration the third party.

The study of triangles has its origins in sociology and social psychology with a particular focus on the individual level of analysis (Woo, 2003: 33-63). The Levels of Analysis approach was first used by Kenneth Waltz and later elaborated by David J. Singer, which offered three different sources of explanations. If the individual level is the focus, then the personality, perceptions, choices, and activities of individual decision makers and individual participants provide the explanation. If the state level, or domestic factors, is the focus, then the explanation is derived from characteristics of the state: the type of government (democracy or authoritarianism), the type of economic system (capitalist or socialist), interest groups within the country, or even the national interest. If the international system level is the focus, then the explanation rests with the anarchic characteristics of that system or with international and regional organizations and their strengths and weaknesses (Waltz, 1961: 20-29). The purpose of theory is to guide foreign policy makers toward an understanding of which of these various explanations are necessary and sufficient to explain the behaviour of the states. Sociological coalition theory and the theory of structural balance have especially influenced the study of triangles in international relations. Coalition theorists maintain that the distribution of power among the players decides who is to align with whom (Caplow, 1956: 489-493). Structural balance theorists argue that the fate of the remaining side is determined by the nature of the other two relationships because players pursue cognitive consistency (McDonald and Roscrance, 1985: 57-82).

INDIA-U.S. RELATIONS: “ESTRANGED DEMOCRACIES” TO “ENGAGING PARTNERS”

During the first fifty years of India’s independence, despite a common history of shared democratic values, India-U.S. relations drifted into a state of “estrangement” (Rajamony, 2002: 1-47). India, pursuing a policy of non-alignment, decided not to join the West in its crusade against Communism which offended the U.S. deeply. The 1960s and 1970s saw the United States veering towards Pakistan while the former Soviet Union offered political, military and economic support to India. India – U.S. relations hit rock bottom in 1971 during the war with Pakistan over the liberation of Bangladesh. A virtual entente emerged between the United States, China and Pakistan against India. The United States sent its Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal in what was seen by India as a blatant act of nuclear blackmail, and encouraged China to open a second front against India.

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the launching of an economic liberalization program in India in the early nineties ushered in a new era in the estranged relationship. Although, there was greater interaction at the political, economic and the military levels, this cooperation was counterbalanced by tensions related to questions of non-proliferation (Sidhu and Yuan, 2003: 94). The conduct of nuclear tests and the announcement of a program of weaponization by India in May 1998 led to yet another low point in the relationship. The United States joined hands with China in leading international opinion against India and to call for a roll-back of its nuclear program. The United States further went on to impose military, economic, scientific and technological sanctions against India. After the Indian nuclear tests in 1998, the non-proliferation aspect of the Indo-U.S. Bilateral relationship became more prominent, given the fact that India has always been a vociferous critic of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime which divided the world into nuclear-haves and have-nots.

The U.S. developed a comprehensive and institutionalized relationship with India, covering broad fields such as economic ties, political dialogue and military exchanges. The U.S. also adopted a policy on the Kashmir issue- namely, calling for respect of the Line of Control (LoC), advocating direct dialogue between India and Pakistan, and opposing the use of force to resolve the dispute that was more favorable to India. India became the largest recipient of U.S. development and food aid in South Asia: U.S. assistance to India in 2000 reached a total of \$170 million- second only to Indonesia among Asian states and more than 45 times that of Pakistan’s (\$3.78 million) (Guihong, 2003).



When George W. Bush ascended the White House in January 2001, his Republican Administration continued the Clinton policy of engagement in South Asia, with a special emphasis on U.S.-India relations. The realm of security was the first beneficiary of transforming U.S.-India relations. The Bush Administration de-emphasized non-proliferation as the sole determinant of US policy towards India and moved away from its demands for India's signing of the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty). The second element of the transformation was in the area of defense cooperation followed by exchanges of high-level defense officials between the two countries and joint military exercises.

From 2001 to 2003, the agenda for bilateral cooperation between the United States and India extended to diplomatic collaboration, military-to-military relations, counterterrorism cooperation, and public diplomacy. This paved the way for one of the Bush administration's major first-term diplomatic achievements, Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP). This agreement, which was announced in January 2004 after months of negotiation, drew its inspiration from the Bush-Vajpayee Joint Statement of November 2001.¹ The strategic dialogue initiated from this statement emphasized on global security issues, including India's quest for permanent United Nations Security Council membership, future defence cooperation, high-technology trade, and space-related collaboration, as well as regional issues pertaining to security in and around South Asia. The energy dialogue has the focus on energy security matters including the proposed Indian-Iranian-Pakistani gas pipeline, cooperation on nuclear safety, and, most important of all, ways of integrating India into the global nuclear regime so as to address New Delhi's desire for renewed access to safeguarded nuclear fuel and advanced nuclear reactors. The economic dialogue, which exists in a limited form, particularly compared with U.S.-China economic interaction, requires high-level political and private-sector participation in order to increase U.S.-Indian economic Engagement (Tellis, 2005).

The September 11, 2001 attack and the war on terrorism that followed the tragic event provided a chance for the US and India to forge an even closer strategic cooperation. It has become a turning point in the Indo-US security relationship. The two countries together implemented a co-operative framework of relationships based on three dimensions: democracy, economy, and security. As Stephen Cohen, the U.S. specialist on South Asia security issues has commented, the United States and India's relationship was "structurally changing" (Cohen, 2000: 1-37). He has continued to argue that India and the United States are each groping for a strategy to cope with the emergence of China as a major world power. There are significant numbers of people, both within the United States and India, which believe that China is a 'threat' to the interests of the two countries (Rajamony, 2002).

SINO-U.S. RELATIONS: “STRATEGIC PARTNERS” TO “STRATEGIC COMPETITORS”

Since the founding of the Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC), till the end of the Cold War, China’s relations with the United States were overshadowed by ideological rivalry in the context of the East-West balance of power (Hook, 2005: 34). Sino-American tensions lessened in the 1970s following the Sino-Soviet rift of late 1960s and the opening up of China by the efforts of Nixon-Kissinger duo. Despite the beginning of the economic modernization programme under Deng Xiaoping after 1976, Sino-U.S. bilateral relations continued to be plagued by U.S. complaints about Beijing’s human rights policy, neglect of environmental problems, weapons transfers and arms sales to Iran, Pakistan and others and maintenance of protectionist trade policies. The Chinese leaders on the other hand continued to criticise the United States on international platforms as being hegemonic. The Tiananmen Square incident of June 1989 remained a pivotal event in the chronicle of Sino-U.S. relations. It fundamentally changed the way in which bilateral relationship between the two countries has been managed since President Nixon’s historic 1972 visit to China (Lampton, 2001). With the collapse of Soviet Communism, the Chinese role in countering Soviet expansionism lost its rationale and the fundamental incompatibilities between the two systems became more pronounced. However, with the end of the Cold War, the strategic importance of the Sino- U.S. relationship was further strengthened and the policy to ‘engage’ China for the greater

Purpose of global peace and stability was undertaken by the Clinton administration (Christopher, 1998: 516). His regime specifically sought to revitalize relations with China through closer economic cooperation by encouraging China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other global conventions. The President’s policy was based on the neo-liberal presumption that China’s inclusion in global economic and political regimes would encourage Beijing to moderate its internal political behaviour and conform to international standards.

As the U.S Department of State Press Release on July 10, 2005 of the speech of the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice emphasized that the relationship between the United States and China is “complex” (U.S Department of State, 2005) with areas of divergent opinions like human rights and religious freedom particularly related to Tibet, Taiwanese independence, military build-up and arms transfers to Iran and Pakistan and favorable balance of trade towards China in the economic sector. However, both the countries have pursued cooperative strategies on issues like nuclear non-proliferation in the Korean peninsula, counter-terrorism measures and an active economic engagement despite its complications. Between 2001 and 2003, China’s overall trade grew by two-thirds, from \$510 billion to \$851 billion and among the key factors in this surge in China’s global trade were the exports from China to the United States, which grew by more than 40%, from \$100



Billion in 2000 to \$156 billion in 2003 (U.S-China Business Council, 2005). The huge Sino- American trade imbalance has heightened the element of competitiveness in Sino-American relations which has had a positive impact on Indo-U.S relations. In recent years the sale of Patriot PAC-3 missiles worth about US\$1 billion to Taiwan, Osama's meeting with Dalai Lama in February 2010 and the constant irritant, the human rights issue, have seriously undermined the US-China relations.

SINO-INDIAN RELATIONS: COMPETITION OR COOPERATION.

The Sino-Indian relationship is maturing into one of the most important bilateral relationships in world politics and their continuing economic growth are projecting them to influential positions within the global market. According to the United States National Intelligence Council Report on emerging global trends, by 2015, international community will have to confront the military, political and economic dimensions of the rise of China and India.³ How these two countries manage their relationship will have a tremendous impact on peace and stability in the regional and, increasingly, global context. Against the backdrop of an international environment in constant flux, the two Asian powers find themselves locked into what Barry Buzan has called the 'security complex' within which they are expected to manage their rivalry and develop ties of cooperation (Buzan, 1991: 2009). The principal factor defining a complex, according to Buzan, is usually a high level of threat/fear which is felt mutually among two or more major states. Historical evidence shows that although China has been a major security concern for India, the Chinese were less wary of India and concentrated more on the pattern of superpower rivalry existing between the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War.

After 48 years of cold peace, mistrust and hostility since the Sino-Indian border clashes in 1962, the demands of realpolitik and pragmatism in policy-making are transforming one of Asia's most important relationships - bilateral ties between India and China. China and India, the two largest developing countries in the world, have a commonality of history, culture, economy and social characteristics, despite certain irreconcilable differences. Each is concentrating its resources to expedite internal economic development, carries out an independent foreign policy and strives for a peaceful international environment. China is a big power in East Asia while India is a big power in South Asia. Each enjoys advantages and influence in their respective regions. In spite of sharing a glorious civilization past and having never fought a single war until their emergence as modern states, security competition between India and China is inevitable as their economies grow. However, the positive note is that this security competition does not have to be conflictual. The contemporary picture in China-India relations today is that both nations are engaged in tempting to put the past behind and forge new

relationships based on the emerging global strategic realities. Trade and economic ties have grown exponentially in the last five years and leaders of both the countries have expressed determination to find solutions to the China-India boundary dispute which have distorted relations in the past.

A stable Sino-Indian relationship requires the effective management of the delicate China- India-Pakistan triangle. New Delhi remains suspicious of the Sino-Pakistani relationship and their resilient security ties, because of the Chinese decision to continue supplies of military equipment to Pakistan reinforcing the possibility of strategic encirclement of India (Tellis, 1997). While China's continuing support of Pakistan is partly motivated to contain India, it is also aimed at maintaining a stable relationship with an important Islamic country and a nuclear weapons state. By this, China would be able to retain its influence over the Islamic unrest in its own territory, especially in Xinjiang (Chung, 2002). India continues to regard Pakistan as the principal external factor in its relations with China while, China is attentive to the India-US strategic partnership and its implications for its relations with India on the other hand. Despite the remarkable improvements in bilateral relations in recent years, serious differences remain. These include the unresolved boundary issue, Tibet, and the Sino- Pakistan nexus. The boundary issue involves more than 125,000 square kilometers in disputed territories. Many seem to believe that Obama's recent visit to India is the indicator of the forging of a strong alliance against China. Both China and India being more than 3,000 years old as nations and with more than 2,000 years of recorded contacts between them do not necessarily need to tread that path. Both have respected and trusted each other from the ancient times. Chinese society believes in maintaining order, given Confucianism's influence and the majority Hindus of India is influenced by the concept of 'Basudaiva Kutumbakam' (universal brotherhood). Therefore, it is also imperative to look at the concepts and notions that shape the societal perceptions in these two countries, as the government and its policies are nothing but the reflection of the society.

CONCLUSION

Diplomatic meetings between the leaders of India, China and the United States in recent years have drawn worldwide attention. Although critics said that the visits were more symbolic in nature, few would question their far-reaching impact on reshaping the bilateral relationships between America and the two rising global powerhouses: China and India. Therefore, it can be concluded that the United States remains a major factor in the evolving India-China-U.S. triangle and both India and China seeks to maximise the benefits from this bilateral relationship with the United States in the context of the present international political system. On the other hand, Washington's engagement of the world's two most populous nations, each experiencing strong economic growth and a raised profile on the international stage, is strategically significant. As the U.S. Government's National

Intelligence Council pointed out earlier in 2005 in its report 'Mapping the Global Future', "the likely emergence of China and India as new major global players will transform the geopolitical landscape in the early 21st century" (US National Intelligence Council [online]). The Report predicting a rising Asia by 2020 points out that "China will continue to strengthen its military through developing and acquiring modern weapons, including advanced fighter aircraft, sophisticated submarines, and increasing numbers of ballistic missiles. China will overtake Russia and others as the second largest defence spender after the United States over the next two decades and will be, by any measure, a first-rate military power". With regards to India, the Report outlines that "as India's economy grows governments in Southeast Asia— Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and other countries—may move closer to India to help build a potential geopolitical counterweight to China. At the same time, India will seek to strengthen its ties with countries in the region without excluding China."

Moreover, the growing economic integration, and hence interdependence, has made the zero-sum game between the three countries pointless. An aggressive bilateral relationship- be it the US-China, US-India or India-China against the third power would be damaging to all parties concerned. The major characteristic of this emerging strategic triangle lies in that it is still in an evolutionary phase and has not assumed a strong and mature form similar to the Sino-Soviet-U.S. strategic triangle during the Cold War. The evolving strategic triangle is also not sufficiently strong since the dominant issues in bilateral relations between two states do not directly relate to the third state (Garver, 2002). And finally, the relationship is asymmetrical as the US and Chinese apprehensions about the possible alignment of the other with India are stronger than India's apprehensions about a potential US-China alignment. It remains to be seen how these three powers manoeuvre their positions in the triangular framework addressing the security challenges of their times.



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