The Evolving US-China-India Triangular Relationship

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Introduction

The reemergence of China and India on the global stage is one of the most significant developments in the international system in the early 21st century.[1] According to an influential report published by the investment bank Goldman Sachs in 2003, China was expected to displace the United States as the world's largest economy by 2041 while India was expected to become the world's third largest economy (behind China and the United States).[2] Goldman Sachs has revised its estimates since then and China is now expected to take over the top spot from the United States as early as 2027 (in part due to the current global financial crisis)[3], while India is expected to displace the United States from the number two spot by 2042 to become the world's second largest economy (partly due to the structural increase in India's projected growth rate).[4] Indeed, by 2008, China had become the world's second largest economy and India had emerged as the world's fourth largest economy, when measured by purchasing power parity.[5]

Noting these trends, the US National Intelligence Council (NIC) believes that "the likely emergence of China and India as new major global players – similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century – will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries."[6] With the rise of

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new great powers, the relations between the major players in the international system enter a period of strategic flux as new alignments and dynamics emerge. How is India likely to negotiate its relations with the existing great power, the United States, and the other rising power of Asia, China, as New Delhi emerges as one of the poles in the emerging world order? According to the NIC, India "will strive for a multipolar international system" as it emerges as a great power and will endeavor to serve as a "political and cultural bridge between a rising China and the United States."[7]

This paper will argue that while a rising India will definitely strive for a multipolar world, it is unlikely to position itself as a "political and cultural bridge" between China and the United States. This view of India's role in the triangular relationship harkens back to early independent India when the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru consciously sought such a role for New Delhi. While the then extant Cold War international order did enable Nehru's India to play such a role briefly, especially during the Korean War (1950-53), the momentous changes in the international system since then have made such a role redundant for any country as the US-China relationship has emerged as "the world's most important relationship".[8] It will be shown that the emergent US-China-India triangular relationship is likely to remain in a state of flux for the foreseeable future as alignments of two of these powers in pursuit of their national interests, sometimes at the detriment of the third power, remain a distinct possibility. There is already some precedence for this dynamic. For example, in July 1998, the United States and China had aligned in response to India's nuclear tests – a move that led New Delhi to believe that it was acceptable for the United States to have India in the Chinese "area of influence".[9] Similarly, given their status as large developing countries, India and China put up a united front against the United States and the developed world at the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009.[10] Finally, the Chinese side perceived the Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement that was negotiated during 2006-08 as a part of their strategy to contain the rise of China.[11]

At the same time, China will remain the weakest link in this triangular relationship as there are no major sources of bilateral disputes in the US-India

relationship unlike the US-China and Sino-Indian relationships. Issues such as the status of Taiwan, China's military modernisation, its political system, human rights, and trade imbalances and currency manipulation beset the US-China relationship. Similarly, there are fundamental sources of disagreements in the Sino-Indian relationship, including their border dispute, the Sino-Pakistani strategic and military relationship, Tibet, and China's relations with India's South Asian neighbours as well as Sino-Myanmar relations.

In the absence of a serious deterioration in relations with China, it is unlikely that the United States and India will align together to contain the rise of China.

Compared to the often troubled US-China and Sino-Indian relations, there are no bilateral issues of contention in the US-India relationship. In fact, American and Indian interests are often congruent on major issues such as managing the rise of China, tackling Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, security of sea lanes of communication (especially in the Indian Ocean Region), and promoting democracy in societies that desire such assistance. Furthermore, New Delhi has begun to realise that a close partnership with the United States is essential if India is to achieve its major goals as exemplified by the path-breaking Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement. However, in the absence of a serious deterioration in relations with China, it is unlikely that the United States and India will align together to contain the rise of China. In fact, it is not clear if the United States and India (whether individually or together) want to pursue a policy of containment vis-à-vis China, especially since China is their largest trading partner. Furthermore, India is more apprehensive about this policy because of its geographic contiguity with China. However, it is not lost on these two democracies that close cooperation with one another constitutes a viable hedging strategy against any Chinese belligerence in the future.

The next section of this paper will briefly discuss the US-China-India triangular relationship during the Cold War before analysing how their relations have evolved in the post-Cold War period. It will be shown that the relationship among these three powers will remain in a flux with the possibility of the alignment of two of these powers against the interests of the third. However, there has been a discernable pro-American tilt in India's foreign policy in recent years. In spite of this, there seems to be little possibility that India will join any US-led grouping to contain the rise of China. Given, its long-cherished quest for

strategic autonomy, India will prefer to deal with a rising China on its own terms and as an independent pole in the emerging world order. India will also cooperate with China, at times against the interests of the United States. But Sino-Indian cooperation is likely to remain opportunistic in the sense that these two rising powers will cooperate tactically when the international system presents them with certain avenues for cooperation. This cooperation will not emerge as a part of Chinese or Indian grand strategies as long as the core bilateral differences related to their unmarked border, Tibet, and Sino-Pakistani relations persist. By contrast, close cooperation with the United States is an essential feature of the Chinese and Indian grand strategies to facilitate their ascent in the early 21st century.

US-China-India Triangular Relationship During the Cold War

The cornerstone of independent India's foreign policy under Nehru was (and still remains) the pursuit of an independent foreign policy.[12] In the then extant Cold War international system, India adopted a strategy of non-alignment to achieve this goal. In addition to this, an inchoate India-centreed pan-Asianism was central to Nehru's approach to Asia. Nehru envisioned India playing a "leading role in the revival of Asia."[13] Nehru had proposed the idea of "a Monroe Doctrine for Asia" on the eve of India's independence.[14] He categorically asserted that "foreign armies" had "no business to stay on the soil of any Asian country" and that the time had come for a similar doctrine to be expounded "with respect to the Asian countries."[15] For Nehru, active cooperation with China was necessary to end colonialism in Asia. Consequently, he envisioned India-China collaboration for the resurgence of Asia.[16]

Given that the Communist Party-led People's Republic of China (PRC) had become an international pariah after 1949 – the Taiwan-based Republic of China was given the Chinese seat at the United Nations – Nehru's India sought to play the role of an interlocutor between China and the West (and indeed the wider non-Communist world). India was the one of the first non-Communist states to extend diplomatic recognition to the PRC, while the United States established formal ties with the PRC only in the 1970s. As a result, India played a very important diplomatic role between China and the (US-led) Western world during the Korean War (1950-53).[17] India also took up the task of chairing the commission for the repatriation of prisoners and agreed that Indian troops would be in charge of that process after the armistice was signed. Later, in 1955, with

the complete backing of Nehru, Indonesia organised the Bandung Conference, an event during which Nehru introduced China and its Premier Zhou Enlai to the countries of Asia and Africa (and indeed the wider world).[18]

However, India's attempt to play the role of a "political and cultural bridge" between China and the West proved to be short-lived. The 1959 uprising in Lhasa, the escape of the Dalai Lama to India, and friction along the Sino-Indian border led to a sharp deterioration in Sino-Indian relations. This was followed by a brief but bitter border war between the two countries in 1962 that India lost.[19] "The issue of military reverses at the hands of China went beyond military preparedness to India's conceptual approach to international affairs."[20]

The war with China proved that India needed military help from external powers to meet the Chinese military challenge. India sought and received military assistance from the US and the UK. India and the US also engaged in limited cooperation with regard to the Chinese occupation of Tibet after the 1962 Sino-Indian War.[21] This was the first time that two of these three powers consciously aligned against the third.[22] However, Indo-US military cooperation proved to be of limited nature and short-lived. Pakistan, a military ally of the US by this time, had profound misgivings about US-India military cooperation. In turn, India itself was uncertain about close military cooperation with the US. The US also demanded that India must commit to opposing Communism globally prior to the establishment of a substantive military cooperation between the two countries.[23] Moreover, India was unable to obtain a nuclear umbrella from the United States (and other great powers) after China's first nuclear test in 1964.[24] Finally, the outbreak of India's second war with Pakistan over Kashmir in 1965 led to a US arms embargo against the subcontinent that ended the nascent US-India military cooperation.

It was under these circumstances that India forged a military-technological partnership with the former Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet split that had become apparent by this time meant that India could also rely on the Soviet Union to help balance Chinese power. This culminated in the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between India and the former Soviet Union that was signed on the eve of the 1971 Bangladesh War. In the meanwhile, taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split, the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to China in 1971 after using Pakistan as a conduit to (tacitly) ally with Beijing in an attempt to shift the balance of power in the world.[25] During the 1971 Bangladesh War, the United States also gave China its consent to attack India especially if India escalated the war in West Pakistan.[26] The United States also

dispatched a US Navy battle group, the USS *Enterprise* (believed to be nuclear-armed, according to strategists in New Delhi) to the Bay of Bengal to warn India against escalating the war in the west. At the same time, it was also meant as a signal to the Soviet Union to desist from taking military action against China in the event of a Chinese attack on India.[27]

This pattern of American and Chinese alignment (together with Pakistan) against Indian (and Soviet) interests continued through the 1970s and the early 1980s.[28] However, a number of developments in the 1980s began to soften the strength of these alignments. These included the Sino-Soviet rapprochement under the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev as well as India's initial attempts to mend ties with the United States under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.[29] India also began mending ties with China. Rajiv Gandhi made a landmark trip to China in December 1988, the first such visit by an Indian Prime Minister since 1954, to break the impasse between these Asian giants. The end of the Cold War between 1989-91 removed the rationale for strategic cooperation between the United States and China. Meanwhile, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the Chinese government crackdown that followed it seriously damaged US-China relations.[30] As a consequence of these developments, the rationale for any US-China alignment against Indian (and Soviet) interests came to naught.

The Evolution of the US-China-India Triangle After the Cold War

The end of the Cold War rivalry and the implosion of India's superpower patron, the former Soviet Union, meant that an Indian foreign policy based on non-alignment was no longer viable. After the 1991 balance-of-payments crisis, India also shed its socialist shibboleths and gradually began to embrace the market for its economic development. The path to a closer relationship with the United States was now open on both strategic and economic fronts. Under Prime Minister V P Singh's National Front government (1989-90), India allowed US aircraft on supply runs from the Philippines to the Persian Gulf to refuel at airbases in India. His successor, Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar (1990-91) agreed to continue US refuelling even after the US-led military action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq began during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.[31] India and the United States signed a ten-year defence agreement under the governments of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and President Bill Clinton in 1995 that provided for joint exercises and defence trade.[32]

Sino-Indian ties also improved in the years immediately after Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing. In 1993, the two countries signed the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity which was followed by an Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in 1996. As a result of these agreements, India and China agreed to avoid large-scale military exercises involving more than one division (15,000 troops) along their borders, while providing prior notification of exercises involving more than one brigade (5,000 troops).[33] While these were important agreements that reduced any immediate military tensions between the two countries,[34] they did not result in any political understanding between them about their disputed and unmarked border. Nor was any progress made along other important issues that divided the two countries such as the Sino-Pakistani entente.

In the meanwhile, US-China relations continued to deteriorate. During 1995-96, China conducted a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait in a bid to send a strong message to the government of Taiwan under President Lee Teng-hui who was believed to harbour pro-independence sentiments. In response to China's coercive diplomacy, the United States ordered the biggest display of American military might in Asia – that included the presence of the American aircraft carrier *Nimitz* in the Taiwan Strait – to send a strong deterrent message to Beijing.[35] It was in the context of this rapidly downward trend in US-China relations that India conducted a series of five nuclear tests in May 1998, citing a threat from China.[36] However, in an ironic twist of events, India's nuclear tests provided the United States and China with an avenue for cooperation to salvage their deteriorating ties. In the pursuit of its non-proliferation goals, the United States joined hands with China which was pursuing its own strategic rationale that included preempting an Indo-US alliance directed against it as well as the prevention of another (legitimate) nuclear weapon state in Asia. This resulted in a joint US-China statement on Indian (and Pakistani) nuclear tests in June 1998. According to Garver, the joint statement was tantamount to the United States' endorsement of China's position that "India should renounce nuclear weapons independent of China's nuclear arsenal" and that South Asia should become a "nuclear weapon free zone."[37]

While India was clearly upset with this US-China alignment against one of its core security issues, New Delhi sought to engage Washington in talks to make the United States understand the Indian point of view. This led to a sustained dialogue between India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.[38] Indo-US relations received

a significant boost when the United States supported India's position in the 1999 Kargil War and blamed Pakistan for the crisis.[39] That there was a dramatic reassessment in America of India's role in the emerging Asian security architecture became apparent when Condoleezza Rice – the US national security adviser and later the secretary of state under President George W Bush – wrote just before the beginning of Bush's first term that the United States should play "close attention to India's role in the regional balance" with China.[40] She further added that "India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's, too."[41] Coming soon after the accidental American (NATO) bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Yugoslav crisis in 1999[42], and just before the emergency landing in China of the American surveillance plane EP-3 Aries after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet (that resulted in the Chinese pilot's death) in 2001[43] – events that severely strained US-China relations – the emergent bonhomie between the United States and India took added significance.

The Bush Administration assumed office in 2000 after naming China its "strategic competitor,"[44] and with the intention of building a close strategic partnership with India. In 2005, the US State Department openly announced its new partnership with India, and stated its intention "to help India become a major world power in the 21st century" and further added that "we [the United States] understand fully the implications, including military implications of that statement."[45] And between 2006 and 2008, the United States and India negotiated a civil nuclear deal after changing US domestic regulations as well international law and ended India's status as a nuclear pariah while recognising it as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state.[46]

After noting the dramatic transformation in Indo-US military and security relations, some Chinese analysts have begun to refer to India as America's "quasi-ally".[47] Chinese analysts believe that America is trying to "reset the global balance of power" through its civil nuclear deal with India by building India "as a counterweight to the mighty China."[48] There are also concerns in China that the growing Indo-US military partnership may lead India into playing a military role to share some of America's defence burdens given that it now finds itself overstretched in two wars.[49] At the same time, China is confident that barring a major deterioration in Sino-Indian relations, India is unlikely to join the US in balancing or containing China. It is believed that India's quest for strategic autonomy will prevent it from allying with the US to contain China. Even then, a former Chinese ambassador to India has warned that given China's "friendly relations" with Pakistan, "there might

be changes in the situation that will be unfavorable to India" should an "alliance" aimed at China emerge between India and the United States.[50]

Conclusion

After the end of the Cold War, the US-China-India triangle evolved from a US-China alignment against India after the latter's 1998 nuclear tests into an apparent Indo-US alignment to balance the rise of China during the Bush Administration. However, it remains unclear whether the United States and India (whether individually or in tandem) are indeed pursuing a containment strategy vis-à-vis China. US-China cooperation against terrorism after September 11 as well as China's help in the ongoing nuclear crisis/stalemate on the Korean Peninsula, not to mention the fact that China is America's largest trading partner has led to some vacillation along the competitor-partner spectrum in Bush's China policy.[51] Furthermore, the current President, Barack Obama seems to be very favourably disposed towards China. Obama's maiden visit to China in late 2009 was dubbed the G-2 "summit" between the worlds's current and rising superpowers.[52] However, an indication of just how fragile this relationship is has been witnessed over the past few months over the complications related to American arms sales to Taiwan[53], Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama[54], and the cyber attack originating from China on the American Internet company Google.[55]

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New Delhi has also tried to forge good relations with Beijing, especially since China has emerged as India's largest trading partner. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently stated that "there is ample space in the world to accommodate the growth ambitions of both China and India."[56] The two countries cooperated recently at the Copenhagen climate conference[57] as well as the Doha round of World Trade Organisation talks.[58] At the same time, Singh has also expressed concerns about Chinese assertiveness in its relations with India. Addressing an audience at the Council of Foreign Relations in the United States in late 2009, Singh spoke of "assertiveness on the Chinese part" and added that "he did not fully understand the reasons for it."[59] According to a former American diplomat and China specialist, Susan Shirk, while "China has been trying to prevent clashes with neighbours," this strategy "seems to have changed with India recently."[60]

It is likely that the flux in the US-China-India triangular relationship that has been apparent since the end of the Cold War will continue into the foreseeable future. Barring overt aggressive Chinese behaviour, an Indo-US alignment against China is improbable. In the meanwhile, tactical alignments of two of these powers against the interests of the third are not inconceivable. However, given America's and India's delicate strategic ties with China and the congruence in US-India interests, the two countries should cooperate to hedge against the emergence of an assertive China.

Notes

1. According to the Cambridge economic historian Angus Maddison, India and China respectively accounted for 24.4 per cent and 22.3 per cent of world GDP in the year 1700 compared to Western Europe's total share of 21.9 per cent and the then incipient United State's share of 0.1 per cent. However, after more than two centuries of colonial rule in India and at the end of China's "century of humiliation," the two countries accounted for barely 4.2 per cent (India) and 4.5 per cent (China) of the world GDP compared to 26.2 per cent for Western Europe and 27.3 per cent for the United States in 1950. See Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective* (Paris: OECD, 2001), p. 261. Also available online at http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/other_books/HS-8_2003.pdf (Accessed on February 24, 2010).
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14. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Volume 3, Second Series* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 133.
15. Ibid., p. 133.
16. Charles H Heimsath and Surjit Mansingh, *A Diplomatic History of Modern India* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1971), p. 56.
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