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India-US-China Triangular Relations: A Panacea for ills or a Plethora of Problems for Global Balance of Power

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Abstract

China's economic ascent in the 21st century has put the US's global leadership in perils. However, like with any major geopolitical game, certain nations are more important to US interests than others, with India being the most important. The Sino-Indian enmity and competition for regional hegemony have been a serious concern for the policy makers round the globe. In the current Sino-US rivalry, the United States' interests converged with those of India's. Both countries have engaged in a Strategic Partnership specially in the current century to counterweight China. This study gives a qualitative overview of China's contentious relations with both the US and India and the US-India partnership to contain Chinese expanding tentacles in the global politics. Focusing on the qualitative research design, this study discusses the Indo-US strategic partnership and the possibility of all the challenges that might be faced towards forging a trust worthy relations between the two states. By rigorous contextual and document analysis, the current study recommends that the lasting peace and stability lies in the balance of power among the regional player and regional connectivity that may enhance trust and prosperity among the nation states.

Key Words: China, US, India, Strategic Partnership, Peace, Regional Hegemony, Global Leadership etc.

Introduction

The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed an increased animosity between the US and China (Lippert & Perthes, 2020). However, the two countries had normalized relations in the previous century, which did get them closer for a quite some time. But inimical and opponent elements were still there as witnessed in the Tiananmen Crisis and the issue of Taiwan (Harding, 2019). The antagonism became apparent in the second decade of the 21st century. The United States National Security Strategy 2017 and the National Defense Strategy 2018 depicted the start of the Cold War between the United States and China (Smura, 2023). The most obvious drive for this antagonism is the rise of China which has made the United States more cautious than that of before (Nagy, 2023).

China's historical experience with its neighbor India has been mixed with cooperation and hostility (Khan, 2023). The genesis of Indo-Chinese rivalry includes territorial claims or disputed territories, race for hegemony and many more. Their contentious relations are evident in early perturbations in the Himalayan borders and during the 1962 war. The two countries have also witnessed a series of military standoffs since 2010, among which the Doklam Standoff in 2017 was the longest. The clashes in Galwan Valley and over the line of actual control in 2020 and 2022 respectively are the most recent ones (Yoder & Bajpai, 2023). Additionally, Pakistan has been considered as India's foe since its inception. Chinese close relationship with Pakistan by providing it with military and diplomatic support turned India against China. Moreover, both India and China are the fastest emerging countries. Both have engaged in a competition and have locked their horns for the expansion of hegemony (Khan & Shamim, 2022). The two countries are also involved in increasing their influence and countering each other in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (Donnellon-May, 2023).

India's endeavor to rise both in its status and power converges with that of United States' interest in keeping a check on China i.e., the common enemy (Khan, 2023). This conception has led both countries to pursue a strategic partnership. But Both countries share a history of intermittent cooperation followed by deeply strained relations. In the early times of United States

and Indian bilateral relations, the United States initially thought India to be deceptive. This was because of India's stance to keep good relations with all as the case of Non Aligned Movement (NAM). At the same time, the United States military assistance to Pakistan inflamed India (Rashid & Mahmood, 2019). The United States' rapprochement with China and partnership with Pakistan added fuel to fire against the Indian interests. Indian nuclear tests in the 1998 witnessed sanctions from the United States, which further exacerbated their relations. The turn of the century brought new challenges for the United States and increased Sino-US differences gradually. These developments pushed the United States and India closer and ushered a new era for engagement and strategic partnership by converging their common interests. This partnership was further strengthened after President Obama came to power as seen in case of nuclear deal.

A strong India can put a counterweight to Chinese expansion. This observation is not new and even dates to the Cold War. The United States having this in mind, aided India in the 1962 Indo-Chinese War during Kennedy's presidency (Davydov & Kupriyanov, 2022). However, this strategy became irrelevant following the Sino-U.S. rapprochement. But the 21st century has again impelled India and the United States into cooperation and partnership. The two countries also have a convergence of interests in Southeast Asia. US Pivot to Asia and Indian Act East Policy is an example of this convergence of interests (Mehreen & Abid, 2022). The Indo-US Partnership is apparent through bilateral agreements like the General Security of Military Information Agreement, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (Ali, 2020). Additionally, the US has supported India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (Khan A. A., 2022). The United States also granted India the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 status. Moreover, the two countries engage in several joint military exercises and huge defense trade as well (Saeed & Javaid, 2020). This Indo-US strategic partnership has limitations and faces some challenges. India follows a reversed Non-Aligned Policy in which it aims to have a partner in each bloc (Shabbir & Ain, 2023). Indian warm relations with Russia have spawned serious concerns for the United States. Indian defense ties and cooperation with Russia have upset the United States. On the other hand, the United States' offer of mediation to Pakistan over the Kashmir Dispute during the Trump era surprised India. Additionally, India has more trade with China than the United States has with the latter. Another aspect of the cautious partnership is the Indian attitude. India only supports its partners where the interests converge. In this context, India exploits the United States to enhance its power (Gul, Hussain, Imran, Rehman, & Haider, 2021).

Sino-US Rivalry

The relations between the United States and China have oscillated between cooperation and confrontation. An acrimonious and vindictive kind of interaction characterized the early half of the Cold War. After that, the United States pursued a policy of Cooperation or Engagement with China until 2010. Then the relations returned to confrontation through the "Pivot to Asia" Policy and were further exacerbated under the Trump Administration (Hu, 2020). One explanation of this inexorable malevolence is the Thucydides Trap (Overholt, 2021). China, which is a rising power is destined to face defiance from the United States which is a pre-existing superpower (Peters, et al., 2022). The current animosity and truculence between the US and China is being linked with the Cold War. Some call it a New Cold War while others like Nye renounced this claim. It is rather a Second Cold War, a continuation of the old one with distinct goals and strategies (Schindler, et al., 2023).

The confrontation has thrust Sino-US relations into a multi-dimensional vying and endeavor for supremacy. Economically, they engaged in a trade war. It was instigated by Trump after he took up the baton. The United States aimed to subvert China's rising economy and weaken the Belt and Road (BRI) project (Saud & Arif, 2020). Quantum Computing can facilitate a country to breach the cybersecurity of its rivals. China's hunt for this technology is a warning for the United States (Grobman, 2020). Competition over Semiconductors or Chips is underway as well. To agitate China's Artificial Intelligence development, the United States in 2022 put an embargo on US export of semiconductors to China (Edwards, 2023). China has increased the manufacturing of semiconductors to escape reliance on foreign countries. China makes more than 20% of all semiconductors and is augmenting manufacturing (Peters, 2023). The South China Sea is another theatre of competition between China and the United States. China's claims in the water body are averted by the United States as outstretching. The US counters these claims by emphasizing Freedom of Navigation in the region and it is fostering partnerships in the region as well to contain China (McLaughlin, 2020). While the countries in Southeast Asia, however, regard China as protagonist in the region than the United States (Murphy, 2021).

An Account of Indo-Chinese Contention: Convergence of Indo-US Interests

Indo-Chinese relations have been conflictual since the mid-20th century. However, the two countries are economically interdependent. From the early 2000s to 2019 the bilateral trade surged from 3 billion USD to 92 billion USD. But the mistrust and wariness pervade, pronouncing the contentious side more than the interdependent one. The two countries are at loggerheads due to many reasons and the antagonism is multifaceted. Territorial claims over border areas are an extensive source of enmity between India and China. The Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin Valley are the disputed territories located in the Eastern and Western Himalayas respectively (Bloomfield, 2021). The Himalayas became a stage of dissension between India and China in the 1950s. Both the contenders had their concerns regarding this region. China suspected that the Indian presence in this area would be detrimental for Tibet. While India thought Aksai Chin under China would be unfavorable to Indian control over Kashmir (Yoder & Bajpai, 2023). They fought a war in 1962 and clashed in Natho La and Chu La in the previous century (Raju, 2020). In the 21st century, India has been accusing China for incursions which led to many stand-offs between the two countries during the previous decade. Among the stand-offs, 2018 and 2020 were the threatening ones (Ollapally, 2023).

The Sino-Indian rivalry has not been limited to the ground but extends well into the waters of the Indian Ocean. The Ocean is conspicuously significant to China for energy supplies. Both countries are sparing no effort to beef up their strengths in the Indian Ocean. This is discernible by the surge in the share of the Navy in the Indian budget for 2023-24. In contrast, China's

military base in Djibouti and its anti-piracy activities corroborate the account of competition in the Indian Ocean (Krothwal & Kumar, 2023).

This rivalry and competition between the two giants of Asia substantiate a Chinese proverb, 'One mountain cannot contain two tigers.' Indo-Chinese rivalry is multifarious and will remain the center of international politics as both countries quest for hegemony/supremacy (Jash, 2023). Although the two countries are part of the same organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, yet this couldn't help to attenuate their hunt for regional supremacy (Chan, 2020). Cooperative engagement cannot satisfy their interests. Therefore, the wrangling and truculent relations between India and China would overwhelm the cooperation. It is argued that China has always wanted to enjoy the status of "Sole representative of Asia" and has, therefore, tried to stop India's joining of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and United Nations Security Council which has agitated India (Bloomfield, 2021).

Manjeet S. Pardesi argued that Sino-Indian rivalry is linked with Indo-Pak rivalry. So, China's partnership with Pakistan is another factor that has frustrated Indo-Chinese relations. Pakistan is strategically important for China in its regional ambitions (Pardesi, 2021). The Sino-Pakistan engagement was named by China's Foreign Minister Yu as "iron-clad pals and true friends". It is claimed that China helped Pakistan in acquiring ballistic missiles, nuclear program, or technology. Military exercises have also been conducted by the two partners to manifest power in the region. Moreover, China's presence at the Gwadar port threatens the Indian supply of petroleum products (Ranjan, 2021).

The Indo-Pacific has become the quintessence of the geostrategic region in the 21st century. China's supplies of energy from Africa and Arabs, pass through the Indian Ocean and then the Pacific Ocean before reaching China. Therefore, China cried out for supremacy in these two oceans which is malignant to India's enduring desire for dominance in the region and other interests. A Rising China has also agitated the United States hegemony. So, the containment of China which seemed propitious, aligned the interests of both India and the United States (Singh, 2019). China's malevolent intentions towards the US were even recognized by George W. Bush. He also accentuated the partnership with India (Purayil, 2021). China's increasing influence in Asia resulted in the encirclement of India and challenged the US position in the region. Therefore, Sino-US engagement is a reverberation of China's threat to US hegemony and Indian interests. The United States started favoring India. The confluence of the United States and Indian interests enticed them to pursue a joint policy. For this purpose, the earlier US 'Asia Pacific' policy was renamed to 'Indo-Pacific' with the integration of India (Singh, 2020). This strategic policy has been supported by other countries as well i.e. Australia (Ye, 2020). India's partnership with the US is aimed at having reassurance against China. And the United States needs India to act as its 'net security provider' in Asia. For the same purpose, the Trump administration stood up for the transfer of F-16 and F-18 to India. With Trump's coming into power, the Quad has set another strategic stage of engagement between India and the US against China (Ollapally & Verma, 2023).

Indo-US Strategic Partnership

China has regarded the United States as a competitor specially at the dawn of the current century. China enhanced its military modernization efforts and naval buildup (Gokhale, 2021). China used its soft power to procure influence over neighboring states which was imperative for global domination. In response, the United States has employed the "Go" a strategy game that has Chinese origins. It is played on a board similar to that of chess. But the purpose is to gain more and more space and to contain your opponent by adding stones to the board. In the Sino-US rivalry, India is that stone being employed by the United States (Fernandez, 2021).

Indian orientation towards the USSR was disturbing for the United States. Indian position was even considered daunting for the US containment policy. And Indian non-alignment posture also agitated the US. But later, the disintegration of the USSR and the snowballing of collywobbles in the Sino-U.S. relations placed the US and India in proximity (Mehreen & Abid, 2022). With the dawn of the 21st century, the United States wanted to remodel its policy towards Beijing. The new engagement with China was to focus on balancing China's emergence. India's booming economic competency enthralled Washington. So, the United States desired for a partnership with India to balance Beijing's increasing influence (Burgess, 2019). Started by the Bush Administration, the Indo-US strategic partnership sprawled from intelligence sharing to military trade and from enhancing Indian Ballistic Missiles' potential to favor in Nuclear Suppliers Group. The partnership has convulsed and deranged security conditions in Asia (Ahmad & Gul, 2021).

1: General Security of Military Information Agreement

The United States and India signed the long-awaited 'General Security of Military Information Agreement' in 2002. The most sensitive matter of intelligence sharing between the two countries started. Secondly, both were compelled to preserve the secret information of each other. The agreement proved to be lucrative as it shrugged off dubiety and vagueness in Indo-US relations and bolstered mutual trust. Moreover, India could now get hold of the 4th and 5th Generation Weapons whose transfer had been refused by the United States to India in the 1980s. Another major advancement was that the Malabar Naval Exercises, that were started again (Nisar, 2023).

2: The New Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) and Nuclear Deal

In the early 21st century, India was vigilant to some extent to engage with the United States to balance China. It was taking steps prudently. Agreements of great eminence were signed between Washington and New Delhi (Li, 2023). The New Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) was announced in 2004 and later the civil nuclear deal strengthened their bond. The NSSP necessitated to cooperate in different prospects from civilian space programs to missile defense (Ministry of External Affairs, 2005). The cooperation in civilian nuclear activities and the trade of high technology were constitutive elements of the agreement. Focusing on civilian nuclear activities, in 2005 the Bush Administration accredited India to be a "responsible State with nuclear technology" and pledged to bring Congress and international laws around to accord maximum nuclear

cooperation with India. After putting in a considerable amount of effort, in 2008 the Civil Nuclear Deal was concluded. Although India is not a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the agreement yet legalized the nuclear fuel supplies and technology transfer to India. The access to such technology can only be used for 'civilian nuclear purposes' and for the same reason India had to separate its civilian nuclear facilities from those of military ones. Such advancements in the Indo-US relations have been bewildering and perturbing for the region. (Mukherjee, 2020; Tourangbam & Torri 2021; Rashid, Majeed, & Ikram, 2023).

3: Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement

The Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement was concluded in 2016 between India and the US. The agreement entails conducting joint military exercises and carrying out humanitarian missions or other military activities with mutual consent. Under the agreement, both countries can use each other's military facilities anywhere for replenishment and refueling. It is intended to provide logistic support. However, it does not include the right to station military on each other's bases. The agreement is instrumental and auspicious for India. Using the logistic support from the United States bases located globally, the Indian Navy would be able to exceed its influence. Moreover, the Indian Naval adroitness would be developed (Ali, 2020). The agreement will also strengthen Indo-US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region (Baig & Waheed, 2022).

4: Communications Capability and Security Agreement (COMCASA)

The common interests of India and the United States against China have stretched and dilated the Indo-US defense partnership to an astonishing level (Parachini, et al., 2023). India and the United States initiated a 2+2 dialogue during Trump's presidency for the same purpose. It was conducted between the Defense Ministers and Foreign Ministers of the two countries. The dialogue resulted a hotline among these Ministers. The Communications Capability and Security Agreement was also signed in the 2+2 dialogue which was a triumphant masterstroke of the said dialogue. COMCASA like the other agreements is felicitous and auspicious for India. With the inking of the agreement, India became able to purchase Communication Equipment and advanced from the United States. And it gets access to advanced defense systems (Haider & Sultan, 2023). Secondly, New Delhi gained access to the "Intelligence Information Database" of Washington. The agreement also exposes to India, the military data of its two neighboring rivals. Moreover, the new Indian purchase of anti-submarine aircraft or other military equipment from the US would come with highly advanced communication technology preinstalled. The agreement strengthens the Indo-US joint push against the US (Shida, 2019). The Indo-US efforts are aimed at countering China which would have perturbing consequences for the region (Khalid & Owais, 2020).

5: Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement (BECA)

The exchange of sensitive defense technologies is a peculiar element of strategic partnership between any state. While Washington is not legally authorized to transfer such technologies to any country without the inking of BECA with it. The United States, after 2002, had been pulling out at all stops to persuade India to sign the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement. The efforts were finally realized in 2020 and the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement was signed between New Delhi and Washington (Kronstadt, et al., 2021). It was inked in the course of a 2+2 ministerial dialogue between the two countries. This agreement comprehends the exchange of sensitive data. Through the agreement, India gets access to the US geospatial intelligence and confidential satellite material. The former tweaks and brushes up Indian Missile's accuracy. The agreement enhances the navigation and enemy detection capabilities of Indian Missiles through the access of aeronautical data from the United States. With the signing of such defense pacts, India has started acting with jingoistic and aggressive designs in the region. This is evident in the recent Indo-Chinese skirmishes (Barrech & Siddiqi, 2022). The agreement further serves the United States' interests of keeping a check on China by providing information about Chinese weapons and military to India (Mukhtar & Rafique, 2020).

Limitations in the Indo-US Strategic Partnership

There are certain irritants that can be a stumbling block in way of fostering credible relations between the US and India. Some of the Indian intentions and policy moves are seen with suspicion in the eyes of the US' policy makers.

1: Russian Factor:

Russia and India have been engaged in a partnership from the time when the United States was not even in the scene. During the Cold War, India pinned its hopes on USSR arms supplies (Lalwani & Sagerstrom, 2021) as both countries had common interests against China and Pakistan. USSR and later Russia have always stood by India in the United Nations Security Council regarding the Kashmir Dispute. A Russian helping hand to India in the Sino-Indian border skirmishes reinforces their partnership. The Indo-Russian partnership comprehends from nuclear to space technology. The cooperation in the former has been increasing remarkably. In addition to this, more than 80% of Indian Defense supplies come from Russia. And unlike the United States, Russia is not dubious and skeptical about the transfer of nuclear submarines to India. Such Indian engagement with Russia has been perturbing and disquieting for the United States which declared Russia a contender and competitor along with China in 2017. The Indo-Russian ties have abominably impacted Indo-US strategic partnership. It is quite visible that Trump threatened India in 2019 to use sanctions due to the purchase of S-400 from Russia. Even the Chairman of the US Arms Service Committee Mac Thornberry stated that the S-400 advancement will make Indo-US relations tarnish. The Indian partnership with Russia threatens to expose American military material's sensitive technology to Russia which has generated serious concerns in the United States towards India (Verma, 2023).

2: Indo-Pacific Region

Indo-Pacific, the coalescence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, has mesmerized the attention of major Powers due to its economic and geographical gravity. Washington and Beijing have crossed swords for dominance in the Indo-Pacific and the former has partnered with India in the region (Khan, 2021). However, both India and the United States interpret the Indo-Pacific boundaries diversely. India considers that Indo-Pacific stretches from the Western part of the Indian Ocean touching Africa and extends to Australia in the Pacific Ocean. Opposed to this, the United States regards the Indo-Pacific to be comprised of the area from ‘the western coast of America in the Pacific Ocean’ to the ‘western coast of India in the Indian Ocean’. India considers the Persian Gulf a part of the Indo-Pacific which the United States’ perception shuts out. (Ladwig & Mukherjee, 2019). Moreover, India's proclivity is to take action in the Indian Ocean, while the United States' preference is for the Pacific Ocean. Such unequal approaches indicate divergent preferences and strategies in the Indo-Pacific region devastating Indo-US strategic partnership (Upadhyay, 2019).

3: Indian Attitude

India, in the 20th century, practiced a non-alignment policy to engage at the international level. India desired to remain non-aligned and to become part of neither the US nor USSR bloc. Contrastingly, Narendra Modi has adroitly and skillfully transformed the non-alignment into a multi-alignment policy. The policy entails branching out interests and partnerships with all countries and being part of almost all ‘multilateral forums’ (Kaushik, 2021). Such an Indian policy goes against the hopes that America has from the Indian policy makers. Washington wants India to only align with the United States immaculately and in an undefiled manner. Additionally, the United States anticipates that India should not pursue partnerships with American longstanding rivals like Iran and Russia. But Indian engagement with Russia and Iran seems to be splintering American expectations. A study by Kumar suggests that even though Indo-Chinese relations are inimical and pugnacious, yet India doesn't seek to become part of an alliance to undermine China. Moreover, New Delhi has expanded its membership to BRICS which is aimed at bringing change in ‘international institutions’. India is carrying out these activities by disguising them under the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’. For India, its ‘strategic interests’ are epoch-making and indispensable. New Delhi and Washington do have divergent interests throughout the world. And it appears that India is prioritizing its interests over the US partnership in the name of ‘strategic autonomy’ (Kumar, 2022; Mishra, 2023).

Is the US Digging its Own Grave?

India's power and position in the international sphere has been amplifying tremendously. Although, it is not economically or militarily strong enough to influence the power structure of the international world yet from the previous decade, India has assiduously started working to invigorate its power and it has a ‘rising power mindset’ (Kukreja, 2020). This is an alarming situation for the United States. Earlier, the United States allied with Pakistan to fight the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan (Hali, Iqbal, & Jamil, 2020); later, Washington to its surprise, blamed Pakistan providing a helping hand to terrorists against the US' interests which disenchanted the US with the latter (Bhatnagar, 2023). A similar story is corroborated for the Sino-US engagement. Washington endorsed a partnership with China in the 1970s by assuming it would fulfill American interests. And after the “Sino-Soviet split” US and China were to collectively confront the mutual threat from the Soviet Union. Although, the Soviet Union was defeated but soon China rose to a position that challenged the United States' hegemony. Learning from the past, in the current Indo-US partnership against China, even if the US succeeds in containing the latter; India will be the next power to challenge the United States as it is already confronting the US-led ‘liberal order’ and craves for ‘global leadership’ (Zhang, 2020; Kaushik, 2021; Lakshminarayanan, 2021).

Conclusion

The Indo-US Strategic Partnership has become a focal point for both countries and international intellectuals in the 21st century. Fashioned on the account of India's rapidly growing economy and power to contain China, it shrouded Indo-US incompatibilities but couldn't expunge them. It seems a lose-lose game for the United States. Firstly, the occupancy of contrasting interests and strategies, if not dismantling, will be arduous for the functioning of the India-US partnership enabling China to widen its influence. In the second situation, even if the United States successfully contains China, it will be jeopardized by India soon after. And if so, the Indian technological advancements and power amplification achieved with the US assistance will be employed against the American interests. India is appropriate for the US interests against China due to its huge economy and power. Indo-US partnership seems to perpetuate above all varying interests between New Delhi and Washington. However, the United States needs to curb and suppress Indian snowballing influence along with that of China.

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