

CHANGING PATTERN OF THE CHINA-INDIA-US TRIANGLE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

[More from the author](#)

When the China-India-United States triangle began to form in the early years of this century, it most closely resembled a *ménage à trois*. All three dyads in the triangle – India-China, India-US and China-US – were characterised by equally amicable relationships. Each country had an overall positive and cooperative policy towards the other two. India's relationship with China recovered from the stumble caused by India highlighting China as the principal reason for the 1998 nuclear tests. The two countries built on the understanding reached in the 1990s on maintaining peace and tranquillity along the border. In 2005, they agreed to a set of political parameters for settling the boundary dispute. Bilateral trade began to zoom. And India and China began to coordinate positions in trilateral and multilateral groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Russia-India-China (RIC), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), World Trade Organization (WTO), climate change negotiations, etc.

India-US relations also traced a similar trajectory after the 1998 nuclear tests, which the United States perceived as a huge setback to its non-proliferation policy objectives. Dense economic linkages especially in the information technology sector were accompanied by a spurt in the growth and influence of the Indian diaspora in the United States. Further, the combination of the challenge of international terrorism and the imperative of shaping the evolving international order in which Asia appeared set to emerge as the centre stage led India and America to conclude the nuclear deal and the defence cooperation framework in 2005.

At the same time, China-US relations also began to recover from controversies such as the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo campaign of 1999 and the EP-3 incident of 2001 involving a collision between US and Chinese military aircraft near Hainan. America persisted with its bet on deepening China's integration into the international system by welcoming China into the WTO. By 2005, China was proclaiming its peaceful rise to great power status, and America was gently urging China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system.

The year 2005 was thus a geopolitical sweet spot for all three dyads in the triangle. They appeared to be in an amicable and stable *ménage à trois*. Things unravelled thereafter between both China and India and China and the United States, whereas the India-US relationship has witnessed steady progress. Two factors are responsible for this change in the pattern of the triangular dynamic. The first is the alteration in the underlying balance of power between China and India and China and the United States, caused by China's meteoric rise as the world's factory and the new fount of investment, America's decline in both economic and political spheres signified by the Great Recession and the domestic and global disruption caused by the Trump presidency, and India's inability to sustain high growth rates. The second, inter-linked, factor is the strategic rivalry that underlies China's relationship with both India and the United States.

The India-China boundary dispute has persisted since China's annexation of Tibet in 1950. Negotiations both before and after the 1962 War have failed to yield a mutually acceptable solution. China, according to one expert, has come to the conclusion that the Line of Actual

Control and eventually the border has to be consolidated on the ground. As a result, the last few years have witnessed repeated standoffs between the two militaries along the disputed border areas. The latest such standoff, which actually led to the loss of life for the first time since 1975, began in April 2020 when China attempted to impose a territorial fait accompli on India. While disengagement began a few days ago, the series of standoffs since 2013 portends further eruptions. Second, India and China conflict also extends to their respective status. India aspires for multipolarity not just in the international system but also in Asia where it does not want to play second fiddle to China. China, however, appears committed to denying peer status to India. It continues to block Indian membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and remains non-committal on India's permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. A third source of conflict revolves around access to key geographical regions. China is acutely concerned about its Malacca Dilemma – that its commerce through the Indian Ocean might be throttled at this choke point. By virtue of the geostrategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India is in a commanding position to monitor the approaches to the Malacca Straits. For its part, India is concerned about China's penetration of both the Himalayan security perimeter through close ties to Nepal and of the maritime security perimeter by gaining a lease over Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port. Indian concerns also extend to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses the territory of Kashmir under Pakistan's occupation, thus undermining Indian sovereignty, deepening China's stakes on the Kashmir issue, and enhancing Chinese support for Pakistan.

In the case of China and the United States, the two countries have entered what Professor Graham Allison calls the Thucydides Trap between a reigning hegemon and a rising challenger. America is keen on retaining its 75-year long primacy in East Asia, which is manifested in treaty commitments and military forces stationed in, deployed to, and rotated through the region. China has, however, articulated the importance of establishing a new type of great power relations with America, which entails US abandonment of treaty commitments to East Asian allies and withdrawal of military forces stationed or deployed in the region. In addition, the China-US conflict extends to political ideology. America remains committed to a world composed of democratic states, which, it believes, would usher in the so-called Kantian peace. Democracy is, however, anathema to the Chinese Communist Party, which is determined to maintain its monopoly over power in domestic politics and can therefore be logically expected to support and advocate non-democratic forms of government around the world.

In contrast to the return of rivalry in the relationships between China and India and China and the United States, the India-US relationship has broadened and deepened into a comprehensive global strategic partnership. This, despite the history of estrangement between these two democracies throughout the second half of the 20th century. Although India and America regularly found themselves on opposite sides of key issues, none of these actually involved a conflict over issues such as territory, status, sphere of influence, and ideology that actually contribute to the growth of strategic rivalry. In addition, what has cemented the partnership is the threat to their vital national interests that both India and the United States perceive from China.

As a result, the triangular dynamic among China, India and the United States has come to resemble a stable marriage – another ideal type identified by Professor Lowell Dittmer 40 years ago. India and America enjoy amity in their bilateral relationship, but both share adversarial relations with China. This pattern appears set to continue into the medium term. India is stepping up defence preparedness and contemplating force restructuring to become better prepared and capable against China in the wake of the now unwinding military crisis. The Biden administration has categorised China as America's "most serious competitor" and expressed its determination to "confront China's economic abuses" and "counter its aggressive, coercive action". And India and the United States have resolved to closely cooperate in support of freedom of navigation, territory integrity, and a robust security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com