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ABSTRACT

In this paper we build on Robert Jervis' concept of strategic triangles, relations between three states where from the point of view of each state the others are pivotal for its security or foreign policy behavior in a given region. We argue that triangles are important in influencing state behavior in the areas of balance of power, deterrence, arms races and status competition, and consider how these dimensions might interact. In this context, this article examines the US–India–China triangle, while also addressing to a lesser extent how other related triangles interlink with it, taking into account how China's rise and increasing economic interdependence impact these relations.

Introduction

Strategic triangles are a crucial yet neglected topic in International Relations. During the Cold War era, they elicited some attention especially in the context of the changing US-USSR-China triangular relationships. In the regional context they gained prominence as the triads of US-Pakistan-India, China-Pakistan-India, as well as US-Israel-Arab states were crucial triangular relationships impinging upon bipolar stability. Today, the emerging and ongoing trilateral relationships such as the US–India–China, India–Japan–China, and China–Pakistan–India deserve greater scholarly attention. One key challenge is the interlocking of some of these triangles involving additional states and thereby them becoming quadrilateral or larger in number involving multiple parties. The focus of this article is on the US – India–China triangle, although we make an effort to see how other interlinking triangles affect this relationship as well.

In many respects, strategic triangles exist because of the interdependence they generate in terms of conflict and cooperation among the three parties constituting them. Therefore, they need to be studied as part of a systemic analysis. From a systems perspective, changes in one part of the triangle affect others, some more powerfully than others. Moreover, as Robert Jervis states, system effects can be indirect and delayed; relations among units within a system often are not bilaterally determined; strategies of states

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depend on strategies of others; and outcomes need not follow from intentions of actors.¹ The dynamics in triangular systems can be complex, especially if there are multiple and overlapping trilateral strategic relationships existing in a given regional space.

Strategic triangles are defined as “an intimate and interdependent relationship of three states whose existence creates a series of incentives and constraints for cooperation and conflictual behaviors among those states ... each state identifies the other two as belonging to the category either of a security provider or a threat.”² From the point of view of each state the other two in a triangle are pivotal for its security or foreign policy behavior in a given region. A high level of usable capability, or a strategic asset, especially in the military realm, is assumed to be in possession of each of these states that they can bear upon the strategic trajectory of a region. By adding the capability and influence of a second party in the trilateral setting the assumption is that the first state increases its own power, influence and bargaining capacity vis-à-vis the third. A state may also be able to exert disproportionate power and influence by being located in a crucial geostrategic area that offers it some advantages vis-à-vis the other actors in the strategic triangle.

In this article, we address four strategic dimensions of trilateral relations, especially their largest manifestation, balance of power in the case of the India-US-China strategic triangle. Hard balancing, soft balancing and limited hard balancing are relevant in understanding trilateral balancing in the contemporary world. Hard balancing relies on formal alliances and arms buildups while soft balancing utilizes international institutions, limited ententes and economic sanctions to restrain a threatening or powerful actor. Limited hard balancing is an in between category which relies on strategic partnerships with some military component and asymmetrical arms buildup.³ Great powers and regional powers are no longer pursuing any single form of balancing as globalization and near-unipolarity in the security arena have produced different options and incentive structures for states. The article will also address the subjects of deterrence, arms races and status competition involving three states in the triangular setting. The aim here is to provide a background theoretical and empirical discussion on the many facets of trilateral strategic relationships.

Robert Jervis argues that “the relations-existing, potential, and desired-between any pair of countries influence and are influenced by the relations between each of those countries and a third actor. If relations between A and B change, so will relations between B and C, often producing subsequent changes in the relations between A and B. Furthermore, A is likely to set its policy toward B with at least one eye on how this will affect relations with C.”⁴ Jervis has identified four crucial ways by which triangular relations can manifest in the international system. First, “an improvement in relations between two adversaries is almost certain to affect third parties. Sometimes

the latter will benefit- e.g., they may have been caught in the conflict between the two or may seek good relations with them both.” Second, and alternatively, “when relations between two countries deteriorate, a third party is likely to benefit, as Germany did from the Anglo-French enmity created by the former’s occupation of Egypt in 1882.” Third, “unless the state is strong enough to combat two united adversaries, it will have to conciliate one as relations with the other worsen.” Finally, “a state gains security as well as bargaining power when its main adversaries are themselves divided by important rivalries.”⁵ While Jervis provides a strong analysis of a few aspects in trilateral strategic relations, we believe more related dimensions exist in these settings. Therefore, we delineate four dimensions of strategic triangles which are all relevant to India-China-US triangle. They are balance of power, deterrence, arms races/security dilemmas, and status dilemmas. The first three dimensions have major ramifications for balance of power and military relations while the last one is significant for status accommodation. Moreover, we show how these dimensions of trilateral strategic relations can interact.

Balancing: the role of third parties

Balance of power dynamics concerning two states is often formed and maintained through coalition activity involving third parties. According to the generic balance of power theory, a state or coalition of states, in order to balance against another power or coalition, would seek the help of a third party or coalition of states to strengthen its power capabilities. It is usually the weaker states that flock together to balance against a stronger power.⁶ Alternatively, balance of threat theory argues that states may also balance against the most threatening state even if they are not the most powerful.⁷ In many triangular relations, a pivotal state emerges with the ability to act as the balancer.⁸ Balance of power is both viewed as a strategy (balancing) and as an outcome. While the former involves active policy crafting by leaders, the latter implies both a law of social relations and an outcome emanating from national efforts at creating equilibrium in power capabilities and relations.⁹

Under hard balancing, an ally can support the balancing effort through maintaining a formal alliance membership, and by offering arms and economic support.¹⁰ The central idea behind balancing is that power equilibrium is essential for the maintenance of peace while disequilibrium will create temptations for a dominant power to act aggressively toward other states.¹¹ Order, be at the global or regional level, would thus require military equilibrium among key actors. Although power capabilities are hard to measure, states make approximate assessments of the capabilities of each side. There is an implicit assumption that equilibrium in capabilities is the key to peace as state intentions could change along with changing opportunities. States with superior capabilities may

be tempted to upset the balance militarily and thereby destroy the sovereign independence of the weaker party. If capabilities are matched properly no power can win and in such a circumstance an aggressive power would be deterred from engaging in warfare. These balance of power dynamics have major relevance for the Indo-Pacific.

China's rise and the emerging US-India balancing

The new trilateral relationship (overlapped by other trilateral patterns like Pakistan-China-India) that has major potential for conflict and cooperation is the India-US-China trilateral relationship. Balance of power is the most significant ramification of changes in this relationship. The US-India balancing relationship currently alternates between soft balancing and limited hard balancing vis-à-vis China.¹² The foundational bases of the soft balancing is bilateral meetings, especially on security matters, and coordinated positions in Asian regional institutions, especially ASEAN and the emerging quadrilateral forum (Quad) involving India, Japan, Australia and the United States. Several layers of links exist in the US-India strategic partnership. This partnership includes cooperation in the areas of civil nuclear cooperation, counter-terrorism, trade, energy, education, space, health, and cultural development.¹³ Under Trump, further efforts have been made to negotiate defense cooperation.¹⁴ However, despite many diplomatic initiatives and agreements aimed to increase trade, disputes remain in terms of trade barriers, intellectual property rights, and immigration.¹⁵ This shows that strategic partnerships need not immediately follow with improved economic ties, or vice versa, although the possibility exists for higher levels of mutual trade and investment.

A major part of the US-India strategic partnership is defense cooperation, which can be seen as a limited hard balancing coalition due to its semiformal nature. This began in a significant way in 2005 with the signing of the “New Framework for India-U.S. Defense Relations,” which was updated and renewed in 2015, and has acted as a semiformal alliance, with frequent bilateral and multilateral military exercises, technological coordination and frequent strategic consultations.¹⁶ In 2016, the Obama administration acknowledged India as America’s first “major defense partner,” which constituted an upgrading of the relationship involving access to US military technology at a level equal to America’s closest allies.¹⁷ This balancing involves a naval agreement allowing use of each other’s facilities for repair and berthing rights. The annual Malabar naval exercise is another manifestation of limited hard balancing.

More importantly, the US arms transfers to India (and some through Israel) are aimed at shoring up Indian capabilities in view of the China factor. Over the past decade there have been major increases in US arms

exports to India, with the total value of exports from 2010 to 2016 estimated at 2.8 billion dollars, with exports in 2013 and 2014 valued at approximately one billion dollars each year.¹⁸ In 2017, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi pledged to improve this defense cooperation, signaling that the new US administration continues to see this relationship as a priority.¹⁹ While the United States is India's largest source of arms imports, India has also made efforts to purchase military hardware from other quarters, including a 2016 deal to acquire 36 *Rafale* combat aircraft from France, and Russia remains India's largest arms supplier.²⁰ Moreover, over the past decade, Indian military spending has increased by an average of 13 percent. While much of this spending takes the form of arms imports, the Modi government has also made a push to produce weapons domestically.²¹ The Indian efforts at diversification of arms sources is a deliberate attempt at avoiding the pitfalls of relying on a single source and circumventing some of the challenges involved in triadic relationships with the the US and China.

In response to China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean, India's maritime strategy has increasingly focused on China. With China building ports in India's near abroad, in particular Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and acquiring military bases in Djibouti and possibly in Pakistan China is increasingly seen in India as a threat. Chinese submarines are making visits to ports in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan and Somalia, which is a concern for Indian policy makers.²² India's 2014 naval strategy referred to the need to respond to traditional and non-traditional threats to ensure the freedom of the seas with a focus on joint military exercises with other countries. The US-Indian limited hard balancing element of this strategy can be seen in the annual Malabar exercises, conducted since 1992, which have grown in scale such that in 2017 the largest naval exercise in the region since the Cold War was conducted by the US, India and Japan.²³ The trilateral element is now buttressed by a quadrilateral effort involving, India, Japan, the United States and Australia which held meetings in 2017 as a soft balancing mechanism.²⁴ The aim of this grouping is to reinforce the need for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and other theaters where China is fast building islets and naval facilities in contested waters and territories. This was seen in May 2019, when India participated in joint naval exercises in the South China Sea with the United States, Japan and the Philippines, exercises that were likely directed at China.²⁵

The question arises, in view of the increasing Chinese foray into the strategic spaces of India and the US, as to why the Indian and US relationship is not leading a to a hard balancing coalition? While domestic politics in both countries plays an important role, the key answer is the unwillingness on both sides to antagonize China and force it to more aggressively pursue countervailing alignments or an arms race.²⁶ In the past, US anti-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan has been a thorn in the side of cooperation

between the US and India, but under the Trump administration, Pakistan became a target of US ire and Washington cut off aid for its alleged support for the Haqqani network in Afghanistan fighting US forces.²⁷ Pakistan has increased its ties with China, while Beijing strengthened its hard balancing coalition with Islamabad. Hence, the effect of the India-US-China relationship is visible in the India-China-Pakistan trilateral relationship as well.

Economic considerations matter in these triangular relationships. China has emerged as India's lead trading partner and has a powerful presence in the US, by way of trade and investment. China is the United States' number one trade partner, holding large amounts of US treasury bonds as reserves, and acting as a major destination for US FDI. Nonetheless, trade is not an overwhelming restraint for either country. Trade with China was valued at approximately 2.7 percent of GDP on average for the United States and 3.5 percent of GDP for India between 2007 and 2016. However, in recent years most of this trade has come to take the form of imports from China, making up 83 percent of India's trade with China and 74 percent of US trade with China in 2016.²⁸ While China is generally dependent on the US, Europe and Japan as markets for its exports, production could shift to other developing countries in the case of conflict, although this would be costly. Moreover, for India this trade relationship is asymmetrical, as India is much more dependent on trade with China than China is on Indian exports.²⁹ In India, these asymmetrical relations have resulted in the BJP government, despite its ardent support of increasing the strategic relations with the US, to be reluctant to go beyond a limit to balance China. Economic interdependence is likely to restrain China's behavior toward India only to the extent to which its actions impact its economic relationship with the US.

While economic relations reduce the chances of an outright conflict with China, in some regards they also create a divide in the India-US relationship. India is the destination for one quarter of Afghan exports, and so has considerable economic interests in the country. However, the Pakistani trade embargo forces Indian trade in the region to go through Iranian ports.³⁰ Iran also acts as a supplier of oil and gas to India.³¹ As a result, U. S. pressure to enact sanctions against Iran has in the past created tensions in their relations as it goes against Indian interests, and with the Trump Administration's abandonment of the Iran Nuclear agreement, it has returned as a source of division.

The United States also needs the help of China to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis, as China is Pyongyang's closest ally and one of its few remaining trade partners. The Trump administration has increasingly made the North Korean crisis a primary element of their relationship with China and has focused on pressuring China to increase sanctions on North Korea. These sanctions included limitations on oil exports and a ban on steel

exports.³² While President Trump has accused China of dragging their feet on pressuring North Korea to abandon their nuclear weapons program, the crisis provides China with a lever to use in response to any overt effort by the US to balance against it.

Thus, the larger US strategic interests with China have so far affected the progression of India-US balancing relations which has had an impact on both states balancing approaches toward Beijing. Balancing vis-à-vis China has been accompanied by partial accommodation due to the economic interdependence of both parties concerned.³³ From China's perspective India alone will not present a major challenge to its goals, but India and the US alongside Japan and Australia and some ASEAN states could constrain China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the military realm. The triangular relationship is now confined to limited hard and soft balancing competition, but it has potential to escalate to hard balancing if China ratchets up its presence in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific or engages in threatening policies.

Trilateral deterrence

A second related area in the trilateral setting is deterrence involving three or more states. Capabilities that are designed to deter each other become relevant to relationships involving third parties in conflict with one of the other states in their triangle. The deterrent capabilities of two states toward a third state can aggregate, as the combined conventional and nuclear forces of these states can be used to deter the third state. Moreover, any increase in ones' deterrent capabilities in conjunction with an ally undermines the deterrent capabilities of the third state. Nonetheless, deterrence in alliances is much more complicated than bilateral deterrence. For a deterrent to be credible, the threat must be communicated, and the target must believe that the deterrer is willing and able to use its capabilities.³⁴ For deterrence to aggregate between allies, the allies must be able to credibly commit to each other's defense, and the target must be convinced of this commitment. Such efforts may be undermined if the very credibility of an ally's commitment leads to buckpassing, or if it threatens the second-strike capability of the target state, leading to an arms race.

The very credibility of a commitment to an ally's defense may also undermine the third state's ability to deter the weaker member of a triangle, leading to asymmetric war initiation. Deterring asymmetric war initiation is often difficult if smaller challengers believe that they will receive support from great power allies. In his previous work on asymmetric conflicts, T.V. Paul has concluded that relatively weaker actors often initiated wars against their stronger opponents if they expected support from third party great power allies. They tend to include this variable in their net assessments and strategic calculations often relying on limited aims/fait accompli strategies,

aimed at forcing the opponent to negotiate favorable political settlements.³⁵ Steve Chan has also studied this phenomenon and concluded that major power patronage in the form of pivotal, balanced, competitive and one-sided positions affect the ways that weaker actors make calculations about going to war.³⁶ Similarly, crisis behavior by weaker powers can also be affected by the possible positions of the great power ally.

Hard and soft balancing can also influence the credibility of a deterrent commitment in an alliance. Hard balancing provides the greatest indicator of a commitment to the other's defense. This is because it involves formal alliances and often the coordination of military forces – the most clear indication of willingness to incur costs on behalf of an ally. Limited hard balancing, as it involves informal ententes, does not as clearly communicate a commitment to the defense of one's ally. The resulting ambiguity creates a less credible commitment, which may encourage the ally to pursue balancing through arms buildup while limiting the ability of the entente to deter a mutual adversary. Soft balancing does not create as credible a deterrent as hard or limited hard balancing, but the mutual adversary is forced to take into account the implicit threat to upgrade the coalition to hard balancing. This may also encourage them to adopt asymmetric strategies that make it more difficult to punish the power due to these actions not being directly attributable to them.³⁷

Deterrence can also be exercised through threats of economic sanctions as part of a soft balancing strategy. Generally, sanctions have been found to be ineffective when implemented for coercion, but the literature suggests that the threat of economic sanctions is often more effective than the sanctions themselves.³⁸ The subject of deterrence by sanctions has received less attention, but in general, deterrence should be easier to achieve than compellence because compliance with deterrence cannot be observed, so it cannot incur reputation costs. Thus, in triangular relations where economic interdependence or nuclear deterrence makes hard balancing costly, soft balancing through the threat of economic sanctions may be an effective deterrent.

Deterrent forms of triangular strategic relationships are especially relevant to South Asia where there exist trilateral deterrent relationships involving India, Pakistan and China. In actual crisis situations involving India-Pakistan or India-China conflicts, these deterrent relationships have yet to be fully manifested. China, in particular seems reluctant to get too involved in India-Pakistan military crises. US support for India has been less military than diplomatic in recent crises including the Pulwana attacks in 2019 or even the Kargil conflict in 1999. This is largely because not all limited conflicts of the strategic partners are viewed as of security threats to all. De-escalation is better than escalation and deterrent threats could lead to further aggravation of the conflicts. However, whenever India builds or purchases a new weapons system or adds more to its existing nuclear and conventional arsenal in view

of its competitive relations with China, Pakistan tends to view that capability as simultaneously usable against it. China's transferring of weapons to Pakistan is viewed by India as not only augmenting the Pakistani capabilities but also strengthening the hostile alliance relationship between the two. Strategic doctrines and military planning of the three states tend to focus on the trilateral nature of relations. It became more complicated as the fourth party, the United States, entered the picture and developed pivotal deterrent relationships, the kind Timothy Crawford has identified.³⁹ Increasingly, US support for India's conventional capabilities and willingness to accept India as a de facto nuclear state is viewed in Beijing as having deterrent and offensive connotations.

Thus, deterrence becomes more complex in trilateral settings, the expectation of an ally's behavior is crucial in whether a state engages in military challenges or not. In the India-Pakistan asymmetric power relationship, Pakistan has often engaged in war or crisis behavior expecting support from China and for that matter from the United States. This produced very difficult situations for the United States in the 1965, 1971, and 1999 wars and several crises between the two states.

Deterrence in the India-China-US context

Increasing Indian capabilities adds to the general deterrence that the United States hopes to achieve in the region. Although there has been reluctance to accept a new nuclear state, Washington has accommodated India as a de facto nuclear state through the 2005 US-India nuclear accord. This nuclear accord also acted to some extent to facilitate India's nuclear ambitions, first by recognizing India's nuclear status, but second by offering civil nuclear cooperation between the two through an exemption to many Nuclear Supplier Group rules that the United States obtained for India in 2008.⁴⁰ While the US has refrained from directly supporting Indian nuclear ambitions, it has facilitated India to advance its deterrent capabilities toward China. The United States used to oppose Indian missile testing, but now has facilitated India as a member of the MTCR and does not seem to oppose India strengthening its ICBM and IRBM capabilities vis-à-vis China. Since the deterrent and defensive support has been limited thus far, and because Indian intentions appear to be mainly defensive, an asymmetric challenge toward China appears unlikely. In the event of an intense rivalry developing between China and India and the United States, the Indian deterrent capabilities in both conventional and nuclear realms will play a major role in deterring and defending against an expanding China, in a coalition that could involve Japan Australia and potentially ASEAN states such as Vietnam. However, this is unlikely to materialize in the short-run, partly because of India's desire to maintain some form of strategic autonomy.

Moreover, US non-proliferation policies mean that Washington is unlikely to provide material assistance other than for civilian energy under international safeguards.

India's nuclear doctrine is to retain a "credible minimum deterrent" using land, air and sea-based capabilities, based on massive retaliation, but with a no first use policy.⁴¹ Nonetheless, competition with China and Pakistan has caused India to increase its nuclear capabilities. If India increases its capabilities to deter China, this in turn threatens Pakistan, causing the triangles to interact. Increases in Pakistani capabilities in turn threaten India. India has slowly built up its nuclear weapon stockpile and production infrastructure and plans to build 6 new nuclear reactors to expand its plutonium production and uranium enrichment capacities, and is in the process of developing a new land-based ICBM, the Agni-V.⁴² India has also begun to develop a nuclear triad. Its first domestically produced nuclear powered submarine was launched in 2016 and its second in 2017.⁴³ This signals that India is a rising nuclear power, and such capabilities contribute toward India's deterrent relationship with China, especially in the context of the emerging trilateral and quadrilateral relationship of India with the United States and Japan.

To Chinese policy-makers and intellectuals, India's nuclear forces are not yet a threat to due to their limited capabilities and technological inferiority, and their relationship is seen as stable owing to their mutual No First Use doctrines.⁴⁴ Instead, the focus for China is the US nuclear force, especially in light of their efforts to improve the capabilities of their nuclear forces, most notably under the Trump administration.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the India-China-US triangle interacts with the India-China-Pakistan triangle, as US accommodation of India and its efforts to deter China in turn threaten Pakistan, fueling a security dilemma.

Trilateral arms races and the security dilemma

A related area (for both balancing and deterrence) is arms racing involving three states. This arms race behavior is complex as it involves calculations on the part of each of the states in a potential security dilemma problem that they face from each other. When state A arms in response to State B, state C feels threatened as well and undertakes its own steps to arm itself. This generates a three-way security dilemma problem.⁴⁶ A great power, especially the pivot that offers arms to both sides may purposely or inadvertently create such a situation, often to placate the ally or encourage it to pursue a strategic goal of the third party. In South Asia, this has been a major challenge for the security relations of India, China and Pakistan. Major military acquisitions or modernizations by India have been made in the face of China's military buildup. However, this has been viewed by Pakistan as threatening and has

led it to engage in its own acquisitions to create a balance of capabilities. Pakistan has historically been obsessed with strategic parity with India despite the huge size differential between the two states.

Arms transfers also face challenges in this triangular setting. For instance, the United States as a major supplier of weapons to Pakistan evoked much opposition from India. Similarly, when the United States or Russia supplied arms to India it generated pressures on Pakistan and it sought weapons from China. During the Cold War, the United States treated India and Pakistan as strategic equals although Washington often tilted in favor of Pakistan. This has come to an end since the late 1990s as Washington has begun to treat India as an emerging strategic partner and a rising major power in facing China's rise. The United States has been attempting to strike many lucrative arms deals with India in view of the strengthening Chinese military capabilities. This has prompted Pakistan to seek Chinese help and the arms race phenomenon has become complex in the region. Whenever the United States offered arms to Pakistan it generated concerns in India while Indian arms purchases from the United States and others have evoked hostile reactions from Pakistan.⁴⁷ Until 2010 or so the United States increased its arms transfers to both states "in an apparent bid to gain influence in both South Asian countries while creating new opportunities for American defence firms."⁴⁸ Today, this seems to have changed as the Trump administration is focusing on defense cooperation with India more than Pakistan in view of China's increased activism in the region and Pakistan's unwillingness to help end terrorism emanating from its soil, which is creating havoc in Afghanistan.

The nuclear realm is the area that has witnessed the most dangerous arms races in South Asia in recent years. This has been mostly true of the China-India-Pakistan triangle. India justifies its nuclear acquisition as a response to China's while Pakistan's nuclear program is a response to India's. Every weapons acquisition has been matched although India still lags behind China in the ICBM area. Pakistan meanwhile has accelerated its nuclear program and estimates in 2017 put it as holding a larger nuclear force than India's.⁴⁹ In April 2011 it tested 60-kilometer short range missiles called "Nasr" that can be deployed on its tense border with India. The intention is to deploy them on mobile multi-barrel launch systems with "shoot and scoot attributes" i.e. to fire and move around different locations. The apparent aim is to make India's Cold Start doctrine non-operational as threatened salami slice attacks by Indian forces will be deterred with nuclear response.⁵⁰ Thus the doctrines of the two states and also China's are mismatched and the potential for nuclear crisis has increased especially in view of the intermittent terrorist attacks in India, some of which originate from Pakistani soil.

Security dilemma in the India-China-US triangle

The US-India arms relationship has been increasing as India emerges as the key purchaser of weapons such as F-16s, Apache and Chinook helicopters, C-17 and C-130 transport aircraft, light howitzer artillery, P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft, jet engines and aircraft carrier technologies, and most recently naval drones.⁵¹ This capability generates security dilemmas for China and its ally Pakistan, although asymmetrically. India's buildup of nuclear and conventional missile capabilities has increased its limited deterrent power toward China and Pakistan. Meanwhile, China is in the process of modernizing its nuclear capability, having thus far improved its second strike capability through deploying an estimated 20–45 road-mobile ICBM launchers, transitioned many of its land based nuclear missiles to use multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) missiles, and the beginnings of the deployment of a nuclear triad with the *Jin*-class and JL-2 submarine ballistic missile launch (SBLM) submarines.⁵² Now, China is planning a major upgrade of its nuclear capability, primarily aimed at the United States, which include increases in the survivability, rapid-response, and penetrative capabilities of its forces which will have significant implications for India as well.⁵³ Specifically, such plans include the transitioning of the rest of its nuclear forces to MIRV systems, and the development of more advanced ICBMs and more advanced nuclear SBLM submarines.⁵⁴

The naval area is where the security dilemma could enlarge more in the future. China is planning a major expansion of its fleet by 2025, with plans to develop a blue water navy with four aircraft carriers, the largest submarine fleet in the world, and cruise missiles able to prevent the US navy from operating in the seas surrounding China.⁵⁵ With Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean, China's rise is particularly salient for India, as Chinese activity in the region includes military and economic cooperation with India's main rival – Pakistan. This includes Chinese investment in the Pakistani port of Gwadar and its possible use of this port as a military facility.⁵⁶ India's latest maritime strategy, released in 2015, shows an increased concern with the geopolitical shift of power in the region, but also a reluctance to commit to US efforts to balance against China.⁵⁷ This may very well be changing as China increases its presence in the Indian Ocean region, and one by one, India's close small islands fall under its economic influence and potentially its security influence. The Chinese presence is also affecting US primacy in the Indian Ocean. These developments have led to fears in India that China is pursuing a “String of Pearls” strategy, seeking to establish naval hegemony in the region.⁵⁸ These fears are partly a result of the mixed signals China has sent regarding its intentions. China has long denied any intent to build military bases in the region, but it has confirmed that it will build military facilities and a port for exclusive military use in Djibouti, and it has been reported that Pakistan has petitioned China to build a naval base at Gwadar, but

so far China has denied any desire to do so.⁵⁹ In addition, China is constrained in the region by their lack of blue water naval capabilities, logistical support, and long range air capabilities, and the need to send forces through chokepoints to reach this region.⁶⁰

While China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region has thus far only had a limited military element, it has become a major concern for India, where it is perceived as a form of maritime encirclement or military balancing.⁶¹ Partially in response to China, and partially born out of India's desire to be seen as a major power, India's navy has expanded greatly over the past decade to become a blue water navy, and plans to expand its navy further, with plans to have a fleet of over 160 ships by 2022, which would include 3 aircraft carriers, 60 major combat ships, and approximately 400 naval aircraft.⁶² India has also been attempting to develop strategic cooperation with countries such as Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Indonesia, and Oman, in order to facilitate the projection of power in the region.⁶³ Moreover, India has, as mentioned prior, been increasing its naval cooperation with the United States through means such as the Malabar exercises and opening of each other's naval facilities for craft visits.

Status dilemma in strategic triangles

The mutual adaptation or denial of status is another dimension of trilateral relationships. A hegemonic power can recognize the status of another actor and yet deny that to the third party. By accepting status differentiation, triangles create status dilemmas for the states involved. William Wohlforth argues that a status dilemma exists when a state concludes that its status is being challenged by another state, and then its own efforts to secure its status may undermine that of the other.⁶⁴ Empirical studies have found evidence that status dissatisfaction leads to conflict when a state's leaders believe that the status it has does not match the status it deserves.⁶⁵

While Wohlforth focuses on bilateral status relations, these dilemmas may also affect and be affected by third parties in strategic triangles. Accommodating a power's status aspirations may alleviate tensions in a bilateral relationship if it increases a rising power's satisfaction with the status quo, but can also undermine efforts to balance that state through coalitions. If status accommodation toward the rising power is not matched by accommodation toward allies that are also rising powers, an ally might be reluctant to join balancing coalitions if it feels that its status aspirations are threatened by unequal treatment. This creates a dilemma, as status is a club good and the value of club goods becomes diluted as the size of the club increases.⁶⁶ The provision of status to a rising power dilutes that of established powers, and also increases the costs and difficulties in providing it to any other members of the triangle. It might also grant privileges that

constitute strategic advantages for the accommodated state, that could increase the threat it presents to other members of the triangle.⁶⁷ This problem is made particularly acute as experimental studies suggest that states in decline value losses in status more than gains.⁶⁸ The result is that states will be reluctant to accommodate the status ambitions of other members of a triangle, particularly if they are potential adversaries.

States are also constrained by the collective nature of status when seeking to accommodate the status ambitions of rising powers. Status is based on collective beliefs among states about the status ranking of an individual state, so no state is able to unilaterally grant status to another.⁶⁹ No matter how powerful a state is, the provision of status requires the cooperation of other powers, in particular great powers. Other members of the triangle can act as veto players, with the ability to block efforts to accommodate the status ambitions of another power, especially through institutions where they wield influence. This becomes problematic in a strategic triangle when one power seeks to accommodate another, but the third member lacks the same strategic incentives, or finds its status threatened by such efforts.

Status in India-China-US triangle

In the India-China-US relationship status matters in a considerable manner. It was the US decision to elevate China as a strategic ally in 1972, and at the same time put sanctions on India for its nuclear testing, thereby maintaining it as an inferior power in terms of status, that generated much dissension in India's relations with the United States. This accommodation has continued since the end of the Cold War despite the lack of a mutual threat, as seen most significantly in US support for China's membership in the WTO in 2001, but it was also seen in the provision of increased voting rights for China in the IMF and World Bank.⁷⁰ While there has been somewhat of a reversal of this trend under the Trump administration, with efforts to deny China the status within the WTO of a market economy, in general the trend has been toward accommodation of China within international institutions. Despite this limited status accommodation of China, Washington has done more to accommodate India since 2005, largely for balancing reasons.

What is changing now is the United States is slowly elevating the status of India, but China is refusing to do so. The United States has supported India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Club (NSG), both opposed by China. Moreover, in the past, US status denial for India had affected their mutual balancing efforts toward China. During the Cold War the United States sought to diplomatically isolate India and balance with Pakistan against India.⁷¹ After India's 1998 nuclear tests the United States enacted sanctions against India and sought to isolate the country diplomatically in order to punish it.⁷² This animosity characterized

the relationship until 2000 during the last days of the Clinton administration, when Washington began to informally recognize India as a nuclear power, which culminated in 2005 when the two countries agreed to civil nuclear cooperation, which came into operation in 2008.⁷³ It should be noted though, that even with US accommodation of India as a nuclear power and its ambitions to become a permanent member of the UNSC, accommodation within international institutions has still generally favored China. Nonetheless, status accommodation of India is generally less costly for the United States than similar accommodation toward China, as China is seen as the greater threat, while India's status competition is with other emerging powers, especially China, rather than with the United States.⁷⁴ The elevation of India as a strategic partner and the expansion of the Indo-Pacific in US goals all portend a status uplifting for India that China does not approve of. Beijing is attempting to keep the India-Pakistan rivalry alive and thereby retain India at a level of status par to Pakistan, as a regional power, while India, through its policies such as "Look East" and "Act East," seeks to transcend the region and become a major power. The United States and East Asian states are pivotal for India's status elevation, as recognition of India automatically diminishes China's elevation as the only pivotal power in Asia and puts a dent in its status aspirations.

Conclusions

The trilateral nature of strategic relationships addressed above are becoming more complex due the impact of globalization and resultant economic interdependence. The India-US-China trilateral relations have become more complex and cumbersome largely because of intensified globalization in both economic and non-traditional areas. Globalization creates interdependencies in multiple layers of state interactions. In order to solve different kinds of challenges, especially collective action problems, different coalitions of states will be required. Outright military alliances may be difficult to form or maintain, except in a limited number of cases involving intense regional rivalries. Instead, soft balancing and limited hard balancing have become primary strategies that states have used to balance threatening powers in a globalized world. The rise of new powers such as China and India in an era of increased economic globalization has entailed states engaging in more soft balancing and hedging as states refrain from hard balancing until threats crystallize more concretely. They may use institutional means to achieve their security goals more often, without necessarily giving the power to institutions to make choices on their behalf. Institutions can be used as arenas for soft balancing coalitions and addressing legitimacy concerns with regard to larger powers potentially engaging in aggressive behavior.

Security challenges today are not straightforward. Multiple and overlapping security challenges are emerging, creating different forms of strategic triangles. Trilateral relations add to the complexity of world politics and regional order, especially in a volatile region like South Asia. Trilateral relations constrain and provide new opportunities for states when balancing, while greater tendencies toward limited hard balancing and soft balancing increase the complexity and ambiguity of these relationships. Prudent statecraft is called for in order to avoid unnecessary arms races, hard balancing, deterrence failures, possible nuclear war and also to elicit greater cooperation among states.

Perhaps the most significant change that is now occurring is the power transition currently underway as China and India rise. This article has addressed the power balancing implications of this in the context of the India-China-US triangle under conditions of economic globalization. Further, the literature on this subject has to some extent neglected to theorize how the four dimensions analyzed in this article interact with each other. There are indeed other triangular relationships that exist in the Indo-Pacific region and more may develop over time.

Moreover, status dilemmas are a subject that is becoming increasingly important in the current strategic context. While China and India's capabilities are both increasing they are also seeking status equivalent to their ambitions, while the US seeks to maintain its own hegemonic position. The potential status dilemmas resulting from this competition, and the possible risks of a failure to accommodate their status aspirations create challenges for international stability and peace. By exploring China's efforts to block US attempts to provide status to India, this article has shown how the status accommodation or denial efforts of one member of a triangle might impact or be impacted by the other member of the triangle.

In the coming years the United States might encourage India to further develop its military capabilities, fueling a security dilemma for China. Cooperation in the nuclear context may also drive a security dilemma as Chinese concerns over the survivability of its nuclear forces increase. However, while the chances of Indo-US nuclear weapons cooperation appear to be bleak, this study also shows how conventional capabilities in an age of soft balancing impact deterrence. The US can use economic interdependence with China and the threat of sanctions, as well as limited hard balancing to deter aggression, but the US should also consider how the signals it sends through its choice of balancing strategy impact the credibility of its deterrent. With regards to status, any efforts to accommodate China will need to be accompanied by similar efforts toward India.

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