



***RECALIBRATIONS IN THE INDIA-US-
CHINA TRIANGLE: PRESET
EQUATION, SUBTLE REALIGNMENTS***

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The triangular equation between India, the US, and China has witnessed radical shifts over the past several decades. During the Cold War, the initial euphoria over Asian solidarity, bringing India and China together, gave way to territorial conflict, resulting in a prolonged freeze in their ties. While India's relationship with the US remained tenuous during this period due to ideological, developmental, and geopolitical differences, China's volte-face in its relationship trajectory with the US—from enmity to partnership—aimed to counter their common adversary in the Soviet Union. Essentially, Indo-US and the Sino-US ties during the Cold War were highly dependent on the three countries' respective equations with the Soviet Union.

Hence, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there arose a phase of convergence between the three; with the rapidly globalizing world order driving the trio increasingly closer through economic interdependence. Eventually, the rising assertiveness and revisionist signals coming from China resulted in widening mistrust in its relations with both India and the US. This played a vital role in bringing India and the US together, leading to an increasing level of synchronization in their policies vis-à-vis China. Considering such long-term trends thus helps achieve clarity in viewing the emerging course of the

triangular dynamics amid fast-paced changes, such as Donald Trump's return to the world stage and a thawing of tensions between Delhi and Beijing.

Ever since the US and China established diplomatic ties, the two countries sought to interlink their economies in a tight embrace based on their complementary nature. The US gained the cost advantage and colossal market prospects offered by China, in exchange for the latter absorbing technological advances and financial investments from the world's remaining superpower. The growing realization of the structural challenge posed by China in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (2007-09) as well as China's expansionist tendencies in Asia led Washington to recalibrate its approach towards Beijing. China undoubtedly weighed heavily on the US' "rebalance to Asia" policy, and the eventual articulation of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy. Applying pressure on China by enhancing the US presence in the former's regional environment could be seen as a key feature of this shift. The US' initiation of the trade war with China during Trump's first presidential term marked the next phase of America's (dis)engagement with China. Though the effort to "decouple" the American economy from China was recrafted as a more nuanced "derisking" under the Biden administration, the momentum to eradicate any perilous dependency on China has not slowed. Trump's return with a hawkish cabinet already signals a ratcheting up of America's pressure on China. To be sure, Trump's tariff threats are not limited to China—India too is a target, as his tariff strategy is known to be rather indiscriminate.

On a similar note, India and China's relations have undergone strain during the same period, nosediving in the past half decade. The two countries retained positive trajectory in their bilateral and multilateral engagement despite the intensifying border contestation and geopolitical rivalry in Asia. New Delhi and Beijing stepped up their engagement through economic cooperation and saw eye-to-eye on many issues concerning the Global South in the 21st century, even though they slipped from the path of border "resolution" to that of border "management." This delicate balance abruptly stopped with the Galwan clashes of 2020, halting the growing

economic and developmental partnership between the two countries. India kept not just China's communication equipment out of its critical sectors but also cracked down heavily on Chinese mobile applications in the country. India insisted that China cannot conduct "business-as-usual" with India while unilaterally violating its territorial status-quo, as well as established agreements in the border areas. During this phase, India further deepened its economic and security engagement with the US and the other Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") countries. However, India and China have recently achieved disengagement at the friction points in their borders after four years of negotiations and entered the de-escalation phase, to eventually be followed up with de-induction of forces. This has opened the possibility for a reset of the relationship to pre-2020 levels, though it will most likely be a gradual process, moving at a pace dependent on restoration of the lost trust.

Indo-US relations, on the other hand, have now gone past irreversible milestones of progress in ties. As far as the US is concerned, investing in a strengthened strategic partnership with India and countering China's strategic challenge to American primacy and the rules-based international order are the two important foreign policy issues for which there is a bipartisan consensus. These imperatives of the US align with India's outlook; moreover, India's civilizational perspective on strategic thinking points toward an adversarial neighbor being encircled by distant partners. India remains a crucial link for the US to connect with the rising Global South. China, with its revanchist-revisionist vision rooted in Confucian hierarchy and the "[Century of Humiliation](#)" narrative, will undoubtedly remain a systemic rival to America's vision of a liberal world order. India's approach to China will remain marked by a sense of trepidation now reinforced in its strategic calculus, despite the ensuing thaw in relations. India's strategic positioning, its demographic dividend and its enduring democratic ethos ensure an organic deepening of Indo-US ties.

Keeping this bigger picture in mind, India will have to navigate the short-term turbulences in its relations with both the US and China. Given China's track

record, India needs to chart the return to normalcy in bilateral ties with abundant caution. For building a better and stable relationship with China, it is imperative for India to strengthen its relationship with the US. The incoming administration in the US should rebalance its foreign policy priorities so that the Indo-Pacific regains the primacy in America's geostrategy. This should not be that difficult, considering Trump's efforts towards the revival of the Quad during his first term and his assurances to end the ongoing conflicts in Europe and West Asia. Through such means, the triangular equation can be recalibrated to achieve strategic equilibrium amid the looming uncertainties.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.