



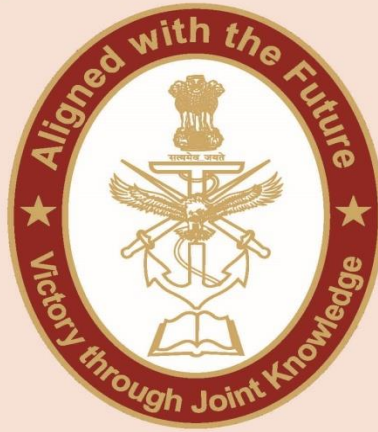
ISSUE BRIEF

CENJOWS

INTERPLAY OF STRATEGIC TRIANGLES IN THE 21 CENTURY GEO-POLITICAL CAULDRON

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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ABSTRACT

Strategic triangles essentially represent a triangular relationship between three key actors within a specific geopolitical context. These actors may compete or collaborate or challenge each other based on their national interests and geopolitical alignments. Strategic triangles are often driven by economic interests besides security issues, including access to resources, trade connectivity, and markets. This can lead to economic competition, sanctions, and trade disputes, which affect global economic growth and cooperation.

The 21st Century has been redefined by the US-led Western brand of exceptionalism, Chinese belligerence and Russia's resurgence sowing seeds of a multipolar strategic contestation in which all instruments of national power have been weaponised. This has led to greater dynamism and volatility of strategic triangles between states. It has also seen the rise of nations like India from the passivism of the galleries to activism in the global playfield based on national values and interests. Indian national interests particularly economic growth and national security require a multi-aligned diplomatic approach to managing regional and global geopolitics. Its unprecedented rise thus poses both challenges and opportunities in managing multiple bilateral, triangular, and multilateral relationships.

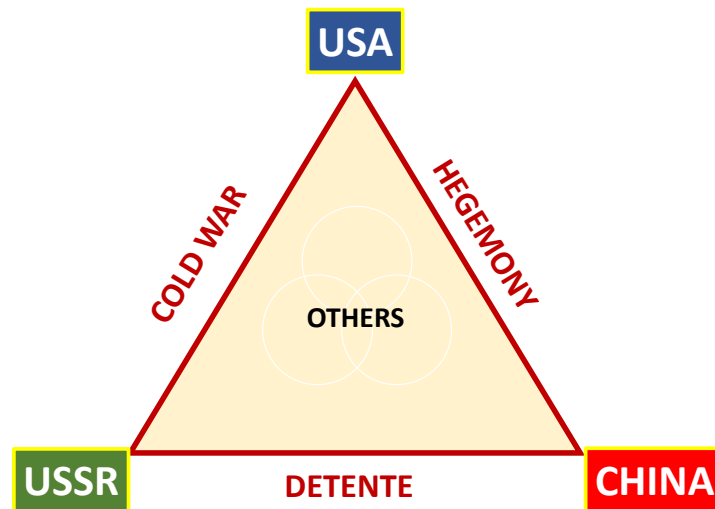
Decoding Strategic Triangles

In today's interconnected world, the global geopolitical landscape is characterised by multi-engagement relationships and intricate power powerplays. Within this dynamic geopolitical cauldron, the interplay of triangles plays a pivotal role in the balance of power in the context of strategic competition and realpolitik. In realpolitik there are both divert and convergent national interests at the same time between nations making the relationship complex and issue based. So, the art of international relations in the 21st Century is to leverage geopolitical opportunities for the furtherance of national interest and the science of international relations is to decentralise globalisation. However, increasing global fragmentation and realignments in international partnerships create overlapping challenges of traditional and non-traditional threats at the regional and global levels. Strategic triangles essentially represent the balance of power in the context of competition between three key actors, often global, regional, and emerging powers¹.

These actors may compete or collaborate or challenge each other based on their national interests and geopolitical alignments. The strategic triangles focus on the interplay of one state on the other two or the impact of the collusion of two on the third state or the differing geopolitical behaviour of all three. Rarely is a strategic triangle equilateral or all three states enjoying equal status and good relations with each other. Strategic triangles are often driven by economic interests besides security issues, including access to resources, trade connectivity, and markets. This can lead to economic competition, sanctions, and trade disputes, which affect global economic growth and cooperation. Thus, strategic triangles present a complex global landscape that demands careful analysis and engagement. To navigate this intricate terrain successfully, diplomatic efforts, multilateral cooperation, and a nuanced understanding of the interests and motivations of key actors are essential. The strategic triangle framework thus enables us to analyse the power play, interests, and strategies among these players.

Great Power Triangle (US-China-Russia)

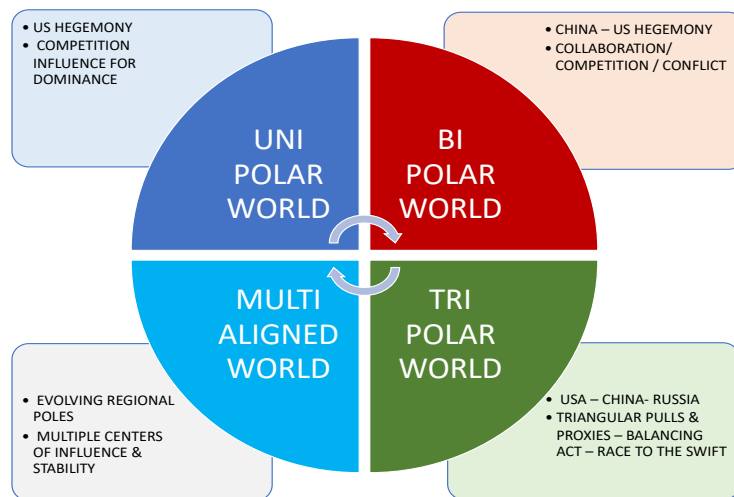
The pre-Soviet Union disintegration era essentially presented one Great Power Triangle (US-China-Russia) based more on strategic security and economic might. The competition between these three powers though not homogeneous, spans multiple dimensions, including economic influence, military capabilities, nuclear, technology, and ideology². The actions and interactions of these nations within this triangle significantly impacted the global balance of power and had far-reaching consequences at the global and regional levels.



While the nature of the military and political relations among China, Russia, and the United States remain ideologically enduring, their character has evolved to be more volatile impacting regional and global security. The strategic relationships within the triangle are very non-homogenous and asymmetrical be it in economic, political, and military terms, yet the gap is closing. The retrenchment of the US, the assertive rise of China and the revanchist Russia have given rise to the present-day volatility of powerplay in the 21st-century geopolitical cauldron. Thus, the pulls and pressures of this great triangle have a global impact.

21st Century Geostrategic Cauldron

The world is seeing a transition to a multi-alignment world order shaped by the intensification of competition for resources and markets to secure strategic connectivity with overlapping and often conflicting interests. While the debate is on bipolar and multipolar world order, the truth seemingly is unfolding in multiple directions of multi-alignment. On one end of the spectrum, it continues to be largely state-centric concerned with the structures of the balance of power, polarity and collective security. At the other end is a widening agenda of multiple orders, which encompasses new trade order, new energy order, new financial order, new economic order, new environmental order, new human rights order etc³. So it's not the model which is important but its elements which will determine not only war and peace but also the future stability of global energy, food security, global supply chain, financial system, environment security, health care, human rights etc. The coalition of democracies versus autocracies has faded away to multiple alignments driven by national interest.



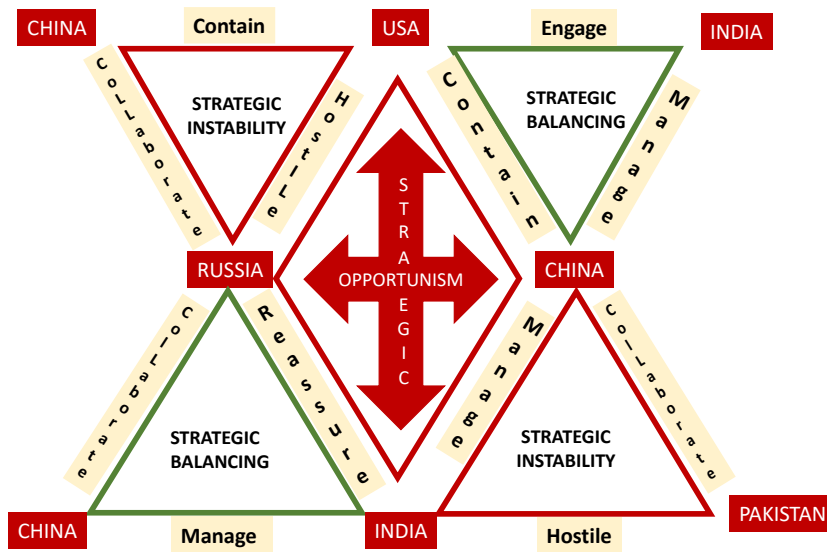
However, increasing global fragmentation and realignments in international partnerships create overlapping challenges of traditional and non-traditional threats at the regional and global levels. This is where strategic opportunism must also lead to strategic balancing and stability.

21st century presents several geopolitical triangles with new emerging power centres, which affect not only regional security and maintenance of the balance of power but also have a global impact. The dynamic interplay of emerging strategic triangles poses numerous challenges and implications for global stability. Any redistribution or realignment of the power within these strategic triangles could have adverse geopolitical ramifications. The competition within strategic triangles can also lead to heightened tensions and power struggles and rivalry affecting global or regional stability.

Rhombus of India-Russia-USA-China: Geopolitical Opportunism to Strategic Balancing

This rhombus is essentially an extension of the complex triangular relationship between India-Russia-United States with China as the common denominator. The relationship is a dynamic manifestation of the geopolitical environment and strategic instability in contemporary times. India's centrality to this rhombus remains the quest for a Eurasian power with strategic military and economic ties with Russia, engagement to manage China and strategic partnership with the USA both as a counterweight against China and for its strategic autonomy aspirations. The complex inter-se relationship in this strategic cauldron is depicted below.

THE STRATEGIC CAULDRON



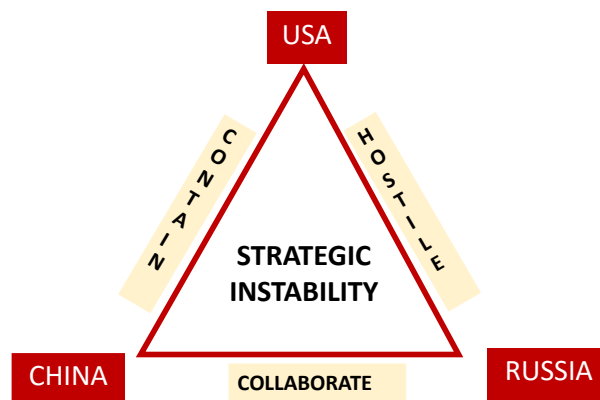
Russia enjoys a special position in India's national interest vital for India's defence posture, trade, and energy resources. Besides Russia traditionally has provided consistent support to India at UN and other international forums. However, the newfound bonhomie between Russia and China and their estrangement with the USA poses complexity for India to balance the three in its foreign policy standing. Russia-China relationship warming up presents challenges for India in the depth of its strategic relationship with Russia. As China's belligerence and revisionism manifest both in the Himalayas and Indo-Pacific, India has thus enhanced its political, diplomatic, economic, and military ties with the United States to meet its national security interests and bridge the asymmetry with China. Simultaneously India's neutral stance in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war indicates its delicate balancing of Russia and US relationship in pursuit of its national interests without antagonising either. It is also indicative of India's efforts to secure its place in a multipolar world and leverage both Russia and US as a vital counterweight to China's growing assertiveness and bridge the asymmetry between the two. Accordingly, the US also believes that it would be unrealistic to divide the Russia-India relationship, as a weakened Russia would be drawn closer to China which would be neither in the interest of India nor the USA.

In this rhombus, India sees an opportunity to engage both with Russia and China bilaterally and through several organisations like RIC, BRICS, SCO etc. Simultaneously it continues to strengthen its relationship with the USA to a new strategic level both bilaterally and through organisations like QUAD, G-20, JAI etc. The quest is to find the sweet spot of geopolitical opportunism and strategic balancing to leverage India's trajectory at the global and regional levels. Thus, maintaining strategic defence cum trade ties with Russia leveraging partnerships with the USA for its vital national interests, and engagement to manage China, gives it the role of a Eurasian power contributing to strategic stability and global peace.

The Russia-China-US (RCU) Triangle

The RCU triangle is the great power triangle resetting global peace and stability. The 21st Century is witnessing the decline in US global power status, China's assertive rise and a revanchist Russia flexing muscles authoritatively. This has created strategic instability in the inequilateral RCU triangle threatening global peace and prosperity. The US is left with no option but the double containment of Russia and China's arms of the triangle. Thus, it requires both strengthening NATO to contain and weaken Russia and building coalitions in Indo-pacific to arrest China's belligerence. The inter-se relationship between the three players in this triangle is depicted below.

THE RCU TRIANGLE OF INSTABILITY



The RCU triangle includes two economic superpowers, the three largest nuclear states, the largest militaries, the largest swath of territory, and a large segment in terms of population. Yet it is not an equilateral triangle of great power rivalry with disparities in national power calculus, economic standing, and military spending⁴. Yet their trajectory has the potential to bridge the asymmetry in the medium term or even outrace the other in the long run. While the US enjoys the top slot, the threat lies in a potential Russian Chinese one plus one versus one (USA) that would become a counterbalance to the United States. It is also sometimes seen as a democracy versus autocracies Cold War 2.0 ideological contest. Thus, the prospect of a trilateral strategic arms race is emerging in this triangle of instability. The challenge for the USA lies in finding the sweet spot for balancing Euro-Atlantic security to weaken Russia, and equally if not more focus on Indo-Pacific security to deter China who remains the primary challenger to its global standing. This is where NATO (EU) and QUAD (Indo-Pacific) find increasing focus. Russia and China arms equally strengthen themselves through SCO and BRICS to counterbalance the US.

The Russia-India-China (RIC) Triangle

The RIC triangle represents the complex dynamics between the three Eurasian powers. This triangle is fraught with tensions between India and China, as well as détente between China and Russia⁵. Its transitional nature indicates Russia needs China more for its economic and ideological stability and India for its strategic relationship. China needs Russia as a counterweight for balancing US and India to remain neutral from the US camp. India needs stability with China for an Asian balance of power cum entry into UNSC, and Russia for its military and energy needs. Thus, the Russia-India-China quest for multipolarity gets strengthened by their engagement. China, India, and Russia together constitute about two-fifths of the world's population, military might, and the major proportion of global resources and power. The triangle has many connotations from one of counterbalance to Western alliance to forging a new multipolar world order. Although the idea of high-level strategic cooperation is still illusionary, tri-lateral political engagement benefits the strategic security and economic growth calculus of all three players.

Within this triangle, India's relationship with Russia remains enduring and strategically evolving based on shared national interest and deepening economic engagements. However, since Russia Ukraine war, Russia has become isolated, vulnerable, and driven closer to China, which impacts India's national security concerns in this transactional partnership. The newfound détente between Russia and China has priorities different than for India. It would be unrealistic for India to expect the same "high value" strategic partnership from Russia, as both Russia and China tilt to a "no limit" partnership between themselves. The inter-se relationship between the three players in this triangle is depicted below.

THE RIC TRIANGLE OF STRATEGIC BALANCING



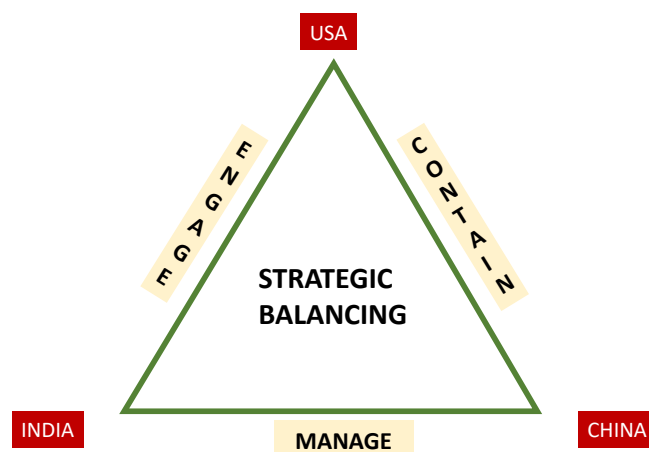
The current state of the Russia-India-China (RIC) triangle reflects a complex mix of cooperation, engagement, competition, and distrust. Its dynamism is shaped by evolving global power play and regional aspirations. Thus, geopolitical opportunism

rather than strategic relationships drives this triangle. Their strategic priorities are not necessarily aligned and at times antagonist to each other. Russia's focus is on consolidating its sphere of influence in the European periphery, China on counterbalancing the US and emerging as a dominant global power, and India for its regional dominance and growth trajectory. Thus, contradiction and constraints dominate the trajectory of this triangle. Economically, the triangle displays an interplay of interdependencies and rivalry. India together with China, accounts for half of global growth in 2023, versus just a tenth for the US and euro area combined. Cumulatively they can collaborate to enhance energy security, promote sustainable development, and foster mutual benefit. Against this backdrop and evolving power dynamics, China, Russia, and India have the potential to create a new global market, bolstering the influence of the China-Russia-India dialogue mechanism in geopolitics through strengthened economies and creating enmeshed stability. All this requires mutual trust which is the missing link in the India-China relationship due to repeated backstabbing by China on the border issue.

United States-India-China (UIC) Strategic Triangle

The UIC triangle is formed by the sole superpower USA, an influential regional balancing power with emerging global footprints India, and a rising global power China with revisionist behaviour. The dynamism of their power equilibrium essentially impacts IOR, yet its spillover has global ramifications on peace and stability. India and US in recent times display increasing harmony in their bilateral relationship and concerns over containing the rise of a belligerent China. Both display an adversarial relationship with China categorising China as the most serious threat and displaying aggressive and coercive actions. Accordingly, the US-India strategic relationship has matured to strengthen a robust security architecture in the Indo-Pacific through bilateral trade and military engagement. The inter-se relationship between the three players in this triangle is depicted below.

THE UIC TRIANGLE OF STRATEGIC BALANCING



The foundational construct of the Asian UIC triangle is based on the four principles of balance of power, ideology, regional security architecture, and deterrence against an aggressive revisionist China⁶. While India looks upon the USA as an important strategic partner in its multi-alignment strategy, the USA looks at India as a counterweight to China and to tilt the balance in its favour. The US looks at China as a strategic competitor trying to upset the balance of power and China looks at the US-India relationship from the prism of US-China rivalry. These complexities are further impacted by extra-regional power dynamics and globalisation creating economic interdependencies.

The competition in this strategic triangle has also heightened the regional arms race, particularly in the maritime domain over the years. QUAD has also emerged as an irritant to China who outrightly rejects the idea of the Indo-Pacific and views it from the prism of the containment of China. Thus, while the three remain engaged, particularly in trade, mutual mistrust is predominant. The dormant angle in the India-China arm is Pakistan-China collusive threat, and in the China-US arm the Russia angle. The US is also concerned about the rise of China-Russia-Iran as a pole to counterweight the US and dilute its global power status. India has divergence and convergences of interests with both China and the US. Thus, while the evolution of India's bilateral ties with both nations have been independent of each other, its power-balancing role has gained importance in ensuring regional peace and prosperity.

China-India-Pakistan (CIP) Strategic Triangle

The India-China-Pakistan strategic triangle is one of the most volatile and dangerous structures symbolised by disparate ideology yet mutually influencing relationships, deeply rooted, and intertwined in historical contradictions. This triangle accounts for half the world's population and has the discredit of the largest warring militaries, disputed flashpoint borders, nuclear brinkmanship, a quest for competing strategic space and periodic confrontations creating strategic fragility. The triangle is not only volatile, but the three states have distinct asymmetry with Pakistan the weakest, China the strongest and India rising at an unprecedented pace at the regional and global levels. This has led to mistrust, collusive interplay and a tenuous oscillating balance between a revisionist Islamic republic struggling for survival, a stable democracy on the ascent in global standing, and an expansionist belligerent communist state challenging strategic stability⁷. It also bears several internal fault lines in each state which are susceptible and often exploited by the other stirring the proverbial hornet's nest. The inter-se relationship in this triangle is depicted below.

THE CIP TRIANGLE OF STRATEGIC INSTABILITY



China as a dominant power occupies the apex of this triangle, with India and Pakistan, who occupy the opposing corners of the base. The Sino-Indian interface is competitive leading to rivalry with sparks of confrontation. The Sino-Pakistani interface is collusive with debt diplomacy making Pakistan a Chinese pawn. The India-Pakistani interface is most fragile essentially defined by no war no peace.

This volatile triangle and its geostrategic periphery also form the epicenter of the global stability-instability paradox. It bears the shadows of other regional and extra-regional states predominantly Russia and the USA for the furtherance of their interests and personal agendas. India's geopolitical options and threat environment were profoundly altered by the Islamist and fragile revisionist strategic culture of Pakistan and the expansionist "salami-slicing" ideology of a hegemonic China. In the context of the Indo-Pak clash of cultures, turbulent disputed borders and Kashmir obsession fuels its proxy war under the solace of a nuclear umbrella⁸. Kashmir remains a central agenda to its narrative and survival of the state, mullah, and military. However, the larger issue remains its insecurity rising from its perception of India as a Hindu hegemon against Islam. This fuels its Islamic card and stirs passion for state-sponsored terrorism. Thus, India needs to take a cue from the Israeli strategy of "mowing the lawn", with periodic assured kinetic retribution, as part of punitive deterrence, to ensure the cost of waging Proxy war for Pakistan is made prohibitive. The asymmetric conventional edge must continue to add teeth to punitive deterrence. In the Indo-China context, China presents a multifaceted primary challenge to India manifesting now. China not settling the boundary dispute with India, holding it as its domicile's sword, leaves no doubt that undercurrents of its aggressive designs remain embedded. China sees India as not only a regional competitor but a major geostrategic player in the Indo-Pacific and a global anchor meant to contain its rise in collusion with the US. Thus, dealing with China's coercion and expansionism has always remained one of India's biggest foreign policy challenges, with comparative asymmetry in economic and military capabilities between the two Asian giants. Relations with China while being managed from competition to cooperation politically, the gap between military aggressive posturing

and confrontation to a conflict will have to be plugged by astute and agile diplomacy till the desired strategic security equilibrium and symmetry is in place. China's periodic forays in peacetime by way of transgression will thus have to be denied any psychological gains with due credible military deterrence and astute political decisiveness to preserve its core national interests. This would be an important aspect of strategic messaging and desired end state for India. This requires collaborative military, economic, informational, diplomatic, and political levers to deter China's revisionist culture and expansionist designs in the Himalayas.

The more dangerous Sino-Indian relationship as seen in recent years is likely to be more competitive than cooperative often giving sparks for a possible flare-up to a confrontation. The disputed border (LAC) is likely to remain volatile and unresolved. The Indo-Pakistan relationship is less dangerous yet more fragile with Pakistan's instability, mutual distrust, and revisionist culture. Thus, uneasy calm with periodic retribution dynamics is likely to remain with an active LC and changing flavours of proxy war. Limited wars single front with collusive signaling or two fronts under a nuclear umbrella remain a reality. The individual agendas of external powers will also unfold along with the price of their opportunist placards. Instability in Afghanistan post-USA withdrawal, Russia Ukraine war dynamics and balancing the two strategic triangles of India-China-USA and India- China-Russia will have their strategic dynamics and fallouts. These triangles of security, political, and economic foundations face stresses that could reshape political and economic relations regionally and globally. India must thus build up indigenous deterrence capabilities based not only on comprehensive national power both in its economic strength and military prowess. Strategic autonomy through Atmanirbharta must be the rightful destination.

India's Growing Regional and Global Influence Beyond the Strategic Triangles

Europe (EU)-India relationships matured post-2004 strategic partnership agreement, giving shape to multi-dimensional issues ranging from trade, health, energy, defence and technology. China for both remains a mutual security concern for global peace and stability, irrespective of the distances separating the two. Russia-Ukraine War brought about a divergence of approach yet did not upset the foundational construct of the mutual core issue of multilateral world order. India's relationship with Africa is both historic and cultural, besides the Indian Ocean geostrategic connectivity. The India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) post-2008 has matured the African Indian relations.

It is held once in every three years beginning from 2008 contributing to enhanced trade and Africa's capacity building besides defence cooperation. The challenge remains the growing Chinese debt funding footprints post-cold War and now since 2000 its largest economic partner. India will thus have to strengthen its political, economic, and diplomatic cooperation with African Union with a clear vision of the future.

India's Act East policy and its ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have consolidated yet need greater integration based on shared concerns, economic growth, and an inclusive Indo-Pacific. The launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) will enhance resilience, economic growth,

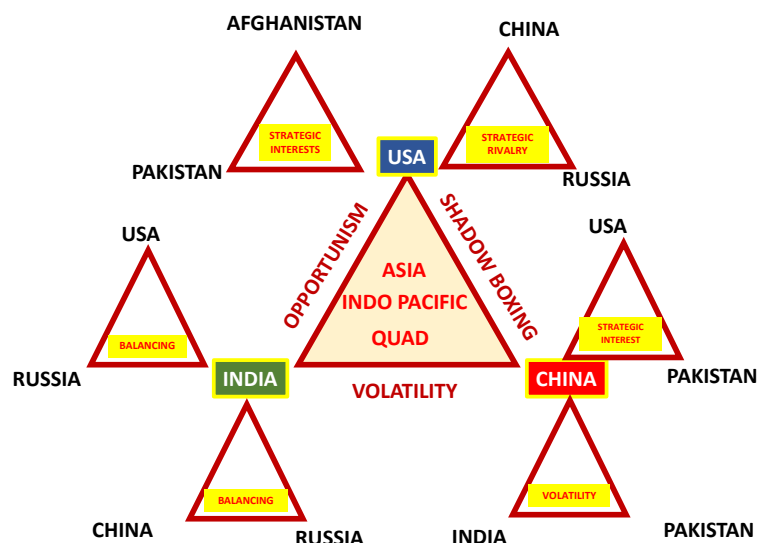
and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. As regards Gulf and West Asian countries, the trade, energy and defence cooperation linkages have strengthened over time. Iran remains an important strategic partner of India irrespective of the US perspective. The India-UAE economic partnership has been a path-breaking development strengthening the relationship. The India-Israel-USA-UAE “I2U2” Framework to increase joint investment in six key areas of water, energy, transport, space, health, and food security has been a positive development too.

Finally, but most importantly the Neighbourhood First Policy witnessed some refocus after the slugs were exploited by China. Less an irate Pakistan and revisionist China, we need greater interlinkages and mutual dependencies to strengthen the bonding beyond present fissures and fault lines.

Strategic Triangles and Implications for India

The last decade has witnessed the international system grappling with new challenges and risks varying from the US-led Western brand of exceptionalism, Chinese belligerence and Russia’s resurgence sowing seeds of global instability and economic stress in the wake of the pandemic. This has led to churn in global geopolitics with greater dynamism and volatility of strategic triangles between states. However, India as a nation traversed these challenges and threats with acumen, seeing the upward trajectory of the nation from the passivism of the galleries to activism in the global playfield based on national values and interests. India’s role in the regional and global arena is fast gaining both respect and credibility as an important player in these geostrategic triangles. The Asian triangular powerplay has the USA (Asian Pivot)-China-India at its centrality which is defining the regional and global power play and strategic stability. The interplay between regional and extra-regional powers is depicted below.

THE ASIAN TRIANGULAR POWER PLAY



India as the largest democracy, a fifth of the world population and the fastest growing economy with rejuvenated comprehensive national power stands at the cusp of

strategic opportunity from being a spectator to a player in the global arena. India is no more a swing power but a balancing power of global recognition. It has taken the lead in confronting global challenges like the Covid vaccine, climate change, disaster management, sustainable development goals, counterterrorism and promoting global peace in the spirit of its philosophy of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam'. Principally, it has always emphasised the centrality of sovereignty and territorial integrity and upholding rule-based order adhering to the UN Charter. It believes that every nation has the right to carve its foreign policy based on its enlightened national interests and make choices based on a cost-benefit analysis.

India's strategic location, emergence as the fastest growing economy and a neutral state gives it a special place in the geopolitical canvas. India's position in world geopolitics is multi-dimensional and multi-aligned to suit its national interest best. Its traditional relationships with Russia may be more complicated yet strategically enduring. Its new partnerships with USA and Europe under its strained relationship with a belligerent China and to foster strategic autonomy is on the ascent. Closer home it needs greater diplomacy acumen and consolidation with its immediate and extended neighbourhood who are increasingly being wooed by China. Further, while Pakistan remains just an irritant whose survival is itself at stake, its collusion with China to stymie the rise of India and create border turbulence is real. India must be conscious that it must collaborate to deter threats but will have to fight its battles alone. Thus, defence preparedness will remain vital insurance for its economic trajectory and global image.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The AUTHOR certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

End Notes

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