**India, China and the United States. Nonaligment or Engagement[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Although most scholars agree that the United States is in a motion of relative decline it may be premature to talk about a shift from a unilateral to a multipolar or tripolar world order. We do see the contours of a new world order but don’t know yet the end result or whether in fact it will turn out as world disorder. The gridlock of multilateralism and immanent crisis in the United Nations and the WTO has changed global policy priorities and decision-making towards regional groups, bilateralism and transnational relations.

The recent foreign policy moves by the Obama administration illustrate the matter. The seemingly diplomatic shift from Europe to Asia can be viewed as an attempt of launching a new Cold War in Asia “viewing oil as the key to global supremacy” (Klare 2011). It may be interpreted as a downsizing of the transatlantic partnership and an emerging unpredictable situation of renovated nationalism and beggar-thy-neighbor policy. The launching of the new defense strategy at the Pentagon on 5 January 2012 was accompanied by US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey’s key messages emphasizing that "All trends are shifting to the Pacific …. Our strategic challenges will largely emanate out of the Pacific region" (Jane's Defence Weekly 2012).

These indications coupled with embryonic protectionist policies by Washington and the European Union to overcome their economic crisis and decline relative to China have increased fears of an all-out trade war. The White House has a potentially dangerous negotiating tool: the threat of currency tariffs (FT 5 December 2011) while the newly emerging economies in the form of BRICs[[3]](#footnote-3) have stated their wish for a re-writing of the international financial architecture and a gradual de-coupling from American Dollar hegemony. The BRICs also reiterated their wish to rewrite the rules and regulations governing other global political and economic institutions (Legro 2012).

In this context the shifting geopolitical and geoeconomic global order is changing its focus away from the traditional strategic triangle of Europe, the US and China to a newly renovated interest in the conflictual, competitive and sometimes contradictory relationship among India, China and the US. The strategic interactions between these three countries have become the subject of intense analysis by scholars and analysts all over the world. The question is whether the new American strategy “Pivot to Asia” has any real substance. In fact, India is the only country mentioned by name as a vital partner and this further raises the question how it impacts the Sino-Indian relationship and furthermore whether we are observing a real geopolitical and geoeconomic shift in gravity from the West to the East. This would imply a weakening of the European sphere of influence whether in the institutionalized form of the European Union or NATO as the prime Atlantic security organization.

This paper has a modest aim in the sense that it first explores the new geopolitical motives of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. It then delves into the concept of strategic triangle; thirdly, the paper explores China and India’s relations and responses to the new US policy; then focus turns to the implications for conflict and security in South Asia and finally, it offers some tentative conclusions on the recent shifts in interactions between these core players in the emerging world order.

*Obama’s new Asia-Pacific strategy*

In October 2011 the Senate passed a bill that potentially will compel the US to use calculations of currency undervaluation when assessing to what extent imports are deemed to be unfairly priced, for the purposes of imposing emergency so-called “anti-dumping” and “countervailing duty” tariffs. This bill is being used as a threat by the Obama Administration to impose protectionist sanctions on China in order to pressurize an upgrading of the Renminbi.

At the same time, in his remarks to the Australian parliament on November 17, President Obama [declared](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f3663938-10d7-11e1-ad22-00144feabdc0.html) that Washington was making the Asia-Pacific region a top priority.  While promising a continued and even expanding US military presence in the region he also hinted at strengthening US-China cooperation.  This seemingly paradox denotes a certain degree of ambivalence in the White House strategy and the question is whether the official discourse has any real substance.

However, in the same speech Obama declared a whole battery of anti-China moves: to deploy US military forces permanently in Australia for the first time, to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership – a multilateral trade agreement excluding China – and to discuss the South China Sea problem at the ASEAN summit (Sakai 2011) i.e. a significant move against what China regards as a bilateral issue towards a multilateral forum.

One prominent Chinese military commentator, People's Liberation Army Major General Luo Yuan, replied on the website of the People’s Daily that Washington was clearly trying to fence in Beijing. "The United States is making much of its 'return to Asia', has been positioning pieces and forces on China's periphery, and the intent is very clear- this is aimed at China, to contain China". General Luo went further: "Casting our eyes around we can see that the US has been bolstering its five major military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and is adjusting the positioning of its five major military base clusters, while also seeking more entry rights for military bases around China……Who can believe that [the US is] not directing this at China?" (Cf Reuters 28 November 2011).

This seeming shift in US strategic thinking, with its distinctly military focus combined with diplomatic and economic means, appears dangerously provocative and may reflect the American obsession with oil as the predominant denominator of global hegemony. As a result of China’s booming economy and the emergence of a big middle class and domestic market, the country’s oil consumption is exploding.  For China, all this spells potential strategic impairment.  The great majority of oil comes by tankers from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America over sea lanes policed by the US Navy.  “Indeed, almost every tanker bringing oil to China travels across the South China Sea, a body of water the Obama administration is now [seeking to place](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/asia/united-states-pivots-eastward-to-reassure-allies-on-china.html) under effective naval control” (Klare 2011) together with India and other strategic partners.

These initial observations lead to a search for theoretical and conceptual means which can give some plausibility to explain what seems to be an emerging confrontation or collusion in the Asia-Pacific involving the big three – namely India, China and the United States.

*Strategic triangle*

One useful concept which illustrates the changing relationship between India, China and the US is that of a strategic triangle. It refers to a situation in which three major powers are sufficiently important to each other that a change in the relationship between any two of them has a significant impact on the interests of the third. The greater that impact, actual or potential, the greater is the significance of the triangular relationship (Harding, 2004: 321). A Strategic triangle conveys a strategic interplay of interests among three nation-states but it may also denote both competition and cooperation. In this sense it is an inherently restricted triangle with its degree of triangulation restricted in different situations. The more restriction the less effective the triangulation and the pivot leverage would be thus creating variations in countries role conception and triangular conceptions varies from time to time (Carlow 1956; Chandra 2010).

Strategic triangle denotes that the initial distribution of power decides who will align with whom. It has been used by neo-realist theory to argue that the fate of the remaining side is determined by the nature of the two other relationships, because players pursue cognitive consistency. However, the theory has only limited explanatory power as it does not say much about domestic politics and configurations and also cannot explain external powers. This is why this paper attempts to bring in the domestic politics and state-society configurations as well in order to complement the theory and focus more squarely on the triangular dynamics and to test how the Indo-China, US relationship fit.

With the rise of the Indian and the Chinese power in the twenty-first century, it is unclear what pattern the triangle will evolve into; “some speculate about a U.S.-India alignment against a rising China; others emphasize about a Sino-Indian cooperative framework against the uni-polar world order led by the U.S.” (Harding, 2004: 323). So far, there is only speculation and more or less a dominance of nationalist and interest-driven predictions. After the end of the Cold War, India seems to pursue a new strategy which attempts to reduce tensions with China and at the same time enhance the strategic relationship with the United States. China, on the other hand, has sought to improve relations with India, break off from its strategic containment policy and continued stability in its relations with the US.

India and China find themselves locked into what can be termed the ‘security complex’ within which they are expected to manage their rivalry and develop ties of cooperation (Buzan 1991; 2009). Security competition between India and China is inevitable as their economies grow but “the positive note is that this security competition does not have to be conflictual” (Chatterjee 2011: 84). In fact there are signs that geoeconomic competition and cooperation notably in areas of energy and oil has overtaken the geopolitical conflict and security ridden issues (Schmidt forthcoming). Since the mutual symbolic recognition of the Tibetan Autonomous region as part of China’s territory and Sikhim as a state in India bilateral relations have improved very significantly. It is also noteworthy that both countries have established a framework for frequent high-level exchanges among defense ministries and armed forces; an annual defense dialogue and joint military exercises as well exchange of officials for study tours and seminars (Yuan 2010: 134).

Economic growth strategies in China and India need the cooperation and support of the United States who at the same time, needs access to the huge markets. The US may become a positive factor for Sino-India relationships, if it enhances regional stability and economic growth in East and South Asia. On the other hand America could play a negative role if it is able to utilize the ‘India card’ or plays the ‘China card’ against the other country.

*US, India and China relations: an emerging global order!*

When Obama visited India in November 2010 he supported India’s full membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Australian Group and the Wassenaar Agreement without insisting on India signing the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-weapons state, which was a clear impossibility earlier. India’s membership in these regulatory bodies would give it an equivalent status to the five recognized nuclear weapons states and make it a genuine partner rather than a target of international non-proliferation efforts. President Obama told the Indian parliament that the relationship between India and America will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century, rooted in common values and interests. “The Obama administration has expanded our bilateral partnership; actively supported India's Look East efforts, including through a new trilateral dialogue with India and Japan; and outlined a new vision for a more economically integrated and politically stable South and Central Asia, with India as a linchpin” (Clinton 2011).

Progressive scholars, policymakers and activists in Beijing and New Delhi see enhanced Sino-Indian ties as a constraint on American hegemony as a counter-strategy to Washington’s overtures. Neo-realists in the United States and India are suspicious of China and seek to build US-India military ties as a strategic counterweight to Beijing’s growing influence. While the US-India and China-India relationships steadily improve, Sino-American relations seem to be entering another strained and turbulent phase in their long, chequered relationship (Chatterjee 2011: 90).

China is now the world’s second largest economy. India is sixth in purchasing-power parity terms. China’s defence spending has experienced double-digit annual growth during the past two decades. India was the world’s largest buyer of conventional weapons in 2010. A study by the US Congressional Research Service lists Saudi Arabia, India and China as the three biggest arms buyers from 2003 to 2010. India bought nearly $17 billion worth of conventional arms, compared to $13.2 billion for China and some $29 billion for Saudi Arabia. These numbers suggests that India is pursuing a hard-line anti-China policy and spending enormous amounts of valuable money which might have been used for development purposes in the domestic realm. Again oil and energy seems to be the common denominator for the Asian arms race but of course it is not the only factor.

According to realist analysis India’s foreign policy is partly driven by a desire, encouraged by the US and Southeast Asian countries, to assume the role of a regional balancer vis-à-vis China. India has also sought a permanent seat in the UN Security Council for a long time and is trying to establish support for this move. India has engaged in the G-20 forum, but never came up with any substantial reform proposals to restructure the global multilateral order. China and India now have the resources; but they still suffer from a deficit of regional legitimacy. This might be partly a legacy of the past - Japanese wartime role, Chinese subversion and Indian diplomatic highhandedness. But their mutual rivalry also prevents the Asian powers from assuming regional leadership singly or collectively (Acharya 2011).

As a regional power, India also needs to consider its geostrategic limitations and one of its major interests is to ensure that the changing contours of the Indo-US relationship do not disrupt the balance of power between India and China and consequently the peace and tranquility in the neighborhood (Chatterjee 2011: 81). Asia remains the emerging geopolitical core of India’s foreign policy and “China will for the foreseeable future, remain a significant foreign policy and security challenge for India. It is the one major power which impinges directly on India’s geopolitical space. As its economic and military capabilities expand, its power differential with India is also likely to widen” (Khilnani et al.: 2012: 12). The challenge for India is to strike a careful balance between cooperation and competition, economic and political interests, bilateral and regional contexts and “this is perhaps the single most important challenge for Indian strategy in the years ahead” (op cit: 15).

The interactions of the strategic triangle on the present world order are huge. The EU is in the midst of a Sovereign debt crisis and is in desperate need of Asian investment and cash injections. Just as Europe is going through this transition Obama unleashed his “Asia First” announcement, which is virtually a declaration of a “Europe Second” policy and also a challenge to the wish of some European member-states support for a multipolar world order based on multilateralism.

It also seems apparent that the navigation of the new strategic triangle shows the same fluidity and less static characteristic not dissimilar to the the previous strategic triangular relationship between the EU, US and China (Shambaugh 2005: 21) before the economic crisis and previous attempts to create a Indo-Sino-Russian antihegemonic strategic triangle challenging US unipolarity (Ambrosio 2006). An action by one side of the strategic triangle of India, China and the US does not necessarily trigger the opposite reaction. It seems that despite some hype about attempts especially by the US to create an alliance with India against China there are no clear examples of two nations strategically aligned against a third. It is even more interesting to note another important layer related to increased interactions especially in trade and growing societal interdependence. On the other hand India and China share skepticism of US hegemony and have common interests in the promotion of a multipolar world order and reliance on multilateralism. What is even more interesting in this regard is an emerging common view on these matters between EU, China and India as well as the intended downplaying of the national security imperative as the driver of international politics and economics.

Although these positive signs may imply a perceived strategic partnership with common interests in transforming the international system and the establishment of multipolarity and peace India and China are very sensitive to each others ties with United States seeing an “alignment between Washington and its rival would place it in a very difficult strategic situation” (Ambrosio 2006: 204). It is safe to say that the India-China relations are strongly affected by US foreign policy while US-China and US-India relations are relatively unaffected by actions of the third party. Among the three sides of the triangle it is only the India-China dyad that is sensitive to triangular impacts (Xun 2005: 8).

*Implications for conflict and security in South Asia*

The question is how Sino-Indian relations and responses to the new American foreign policy have evolved and secondly what are the implications for security in East and South Asia.

Rapprochement between India and China started with the signing of a declaration in 1999 and reiterated again in 2003. Here India explicitly noted that China was not seen as a threat and acceptance of improvements in the Indo-Chinese relationship did not hinder China’s alliance with Pakistan. In the following decade the two countries have been on the path of reconciliation. It may also be noted in passim that China recognizes India’s strive to entangle itself from the conflict with Pakistan and its wish to reach beyond the subcontinent (Yuan 2010: 135).

However, there are several incidents pointing to a more sophisticated but also contradictory relationship between India and China. For instance, India seems to challenge China by agreeing to undertake joint oil exploration in a disputed area of the South China Sea. This has been portrayed as Chinese opposition of India’s attempt and “claim to be a regional power” (Pant 2012) but also came in the wake of an incident involving warships from both India and China in the disputed area. Indian-Vietnamese defense cooperation and giving Indian Navy basing rights at the Nha Trang Port is also viewed with suspicion given China’s unresolved territorial issues with each country.

India has also established the Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership and also enhanced relations with ASEAN including improved relations with Myanmar and Vietnam. New Delhi’s Southeast Asia diplomacy could create problems for Chinese-ASEAN relations while Indian and ASEAN naval cooperation could impinge on China’s maritime interests, making a final resolution of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea even more difficult.

China’s response to the New Obama Asia centered foreign policy relies not only on its relationship with India but a growing anxiety over the intensification of economic and political disputes with Japan, EU and the United States. One instrument is related to China’s growing economic clout and its wish to use economic leverage to further advance its foreign policy goals.

China’s support to Pakistan remains a key element in China’s South Asia policy. Beijing has urged the US and India to help stabilize Pakistan and not to contribute to that country falling apart. Pakistan is not a strategic counterweight to India but remains a battleground for US and Chinese interests and China does not want its relations with Islamabad “to scuttle the process of normalization with New Delhi, or worse, want to be dragged into the middle of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan” (Yuan 2007: 139). The same may be said about China’s relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal having acquired “multiple dimensions, ranging from cultural diplomacy, economic engagement to security cooperation” (Palit 2010: 21).

China’s position in both East and South Asia is characterized by a paradox: “despite its relative decline, the United States has become the most sought-after power in the region. For all want to benefit from economic ties with China, but none want the region dominated by Beijing or their policy options constrained by China. Put simply, there is no desire to replace the fading U.S. hegemony with Chinese hegemony” (Malik 2012: 346).

It also needs to be taken into consideration that more and more non-state actors are penetrating foreign policy matters in both India and China not only in the economic sphere but also on strategic issues related to conflict within the regions (Schmidt 2012; Schmidt forthcoming). The impact of new actors and the soft penetration of prerogatives of national sovereignty impinge in a positive way on conflict prevention in some areas and in a negative fashion in other areas. The increasing synergies created by think tanks, NGOs, social movements, regional parties and private companies have important consequences for prospects of peace and stability.

Nonetheless, the key focus of India’s foreign policy now and in the future is nonalignment and an avoidance of creating formal strategic alliances with other actors (Khilnani et al.: 2012). Nonalignment understood as an updated, modernized and flexible version renouncing membership in formal alliances. According to a key document outlining India’s foreign policy in the coming years the prospects for success are determined by India’s own internal development first before maximization of any grand strategy can be pursued. The prominent authors close to the Congress-led coalition government talk about the creation of equity, social safety nets and energy security but also point to India’s democracy which fuel rising popular expectations “precisely when many institutions are in atrophy or disrepair” (Tellis 2012: 18). The main challenges ahead consist of accommodating new regional parties; align what Vajpeyi describes as the “two nations: India and non-India” (Vajpeyi cf Anderson 2012), impart stability to the relationship with Pakistan, and more serious attempts to integrate the immediate neighborhood into the economic realm. These moves are key to enhance conflict prevention and stability. growth and social justice both domestically, in the South Asian region and in relation to China.

According to the same document “China remains suspicious of India’s partnerships and in particular sees improved Indian ties with America and Japan in simple zero-sum terms. It follows that over the long run, the triangular relationship between India, China and America will need very careful management” (Khilnani et al.: 2012: 32). The report furthermore emphasized that “The partnership game, if played delicately, can yield real benefits. The prospect that India is a potential partner can give it leverage, both with the country courting it and with potential rivals. India must leverage to the full extent possible this dual diplomatic potential” (Ibid).

The conclusion is that is undoubtedly in India’s best interests to have a deep and wide engagement with as many powers as are willing to engage with it. Washington may be a likely alliance partner for India but this would be premature and the authors stress that “both India and the United States may be better served by being friends rather than allies” (Khilnani et al.: 2012: 32). The Indo-China relationship outlined in this key report receives harsh comments from an American commentator who accuses the authors of “inadequate treatment of the China problem” and accuses the authors of being at odds with their own analysis (Tellis 2012: 41). These comments are neat illustrations of American frustration with India’s nonalignment2.

*By way of conclusion*

Historically speaking the US has in political cultural and economic terms regarded itself as an Atlantic country.  The new Obama strategy denotes a strengthening of American emphasis on Asia and the Pacific and could implicitly mean that the US will give less priority to Europe although NATO is still functioning as the main pillar of trans-Atlantic security.

It is unclear whether Obama’s Asia-first policy is a policy to contain China and what the US want to offer India in order to establish a binding alliance between the two countries.  The conclusion drawn from the foregoing analysis is that Obama has not reversed the previous course of American strategy toward China. On the contrary it is a codification of what the US had already decided to do by the previous Bush Administration and what was pointed out already in the US 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review (Hardy 2012).

The interests of the military-industrial complex, which pushed the US to treat China as enemy, have been paralyzed by Bush obsession with terror. Large US companies, are making profits in China and would not want to be driven out of the Chinese market as a result of worsening US-China relations. The main question remains who at the center of power in the US wish to promote an anti-China policy that goes beyond campaign rhetoric?

The key question for India is how far it will push its containment strategy towards China that is long on symbolism and short on substance, thereby managing to be simultaneously provocative and ineffectual. India’s relationship with the United States is based on partnership not alliance and thus an act of convenience. Whether Delhi is willing to parlay these rather symbolic moves into a permanent role within a loose US-led alliance of democratic Asia-Pacific nations perhaps depends more on Chinese actions than those of the US. In India there are also some observers who subscribe to the possibility of encirclement by Beijing in the form of military bases in the Seychelles, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. As a commentator at Jane’s note: “Unless the fear of a 'string of pearls' – as this encirclement theory has been tagged – becomes a reality, then New Delhi may prefer to keep the US at arms' length. It is all very well for Washington to see India as an 'anchor' in the IOR, but New Delhi may not want the accompanying chain” (Hardy 2012).

As long as the Indian-Sino and American relationship is constrained by the strategic triangular relationship it remains to be seen what impact it will have on the evolving world order. So far there seems to be agreement to manage India and China’s integration into the world system as smoothly and peacefully as possible. Furthermore, the cornerstone of enhancing strategic triangularity is the bilateral rapprochement between India and China in trade and security which is growing rapidly and in vital ways although not without obstacles as well. On the other hand, the India-Us relationship has been pragmatic and well conceived. Not without serious disagreements and contradictions but constructive and probably a US that needs India more than the other way around. The biggest obstacle is the US- China strategic relationship which is slowly entering a phase with new turbulence and issues of disagreement which could impact security and conflict in East and South Asia.

The future challenge is to treat disagreements in the triangle as virtuous circle rather than a competitive triangle but this is hinged on the Sino-American relationship which needs to be improved in order to conceive a smooth and effective form of strategic triangularity.

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While Europe dominated the world for centuries,

the EU is currently not seen – despite its undisputed economic strength – as “a major military

power or a serious global geopolitical player, with most of its diplomatic energies focused

on trying to handle the problems of EU integration and expansion, and in preventing the

re-emergence of old fault lines.”34 In other words, neither the EU as a whole nor any of the

European states individually currently constitute a vital element in the “triangular” power

relationships and consequently do not significantly figure in India’s strategic calculations.

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3. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)