

70 YEARS OF INDIA-RUSSIA TIES

The Four Faces of 21st-Century Asian Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT As global geopolitics enters a multipolar era, there is a need to assess the extent to which strategic concepts from the bipolar era remain valid and useful. In this brief, the notion of a 'strategic triangle', which became prominent during the Cold War, is extended to a 'great-powers tetrahedron' for Asia in the 21st century. The brief describes this notion and examines four triangular relationships involving India, China, Russia, and the United States which form the four faces of the tetrahedron.

INTRODUCTION

Russia and India celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relationship this year at a time when international politics is witnessing pronounced upheaval. This upheaval – driven by a mix of domestic politics as well as global geopolitical rebalancing – has led many to question the future of the western-led liberal international order. Among the normative claims about what would follow the demise of the old model is that of the birth of a 'post-western order', shaped by self-interested (re)emerging powers. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, for example, speaking at the 2017 Munich Security

Conference defined this as an epoch in the evolution of the international order where states seek to prioritise national interest (narrowly-defined) over all other concerns.¹

A sympathetic theorist of international relations, therefore, could read Lavrov as a spokesperson for realism. The state will further its national interest by maximising either its security or power, and realists would argue this to be the premise of the post-western order. But there is nothing intrinsically new about this. Indeed, realism would contend that states have

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always behaved this way. This is not to say that the structure of the international system precludes any form of cooperation. Indeed, cooperative relationships may naturally arise in situations involving three or more players in the international system – even under conditions of anarchy; this is a basic premise of realism.² A classic example of this is the US-China-(Soviet) Russia strategic triangle of the late 1960s and the 1970s during the Cold War.

As the world moves to a multipolar system – 'polycentric' may be a more apt characterisation – a natural question to ask is to what extent strategic triangles can be a basis for theoretical analysis of international relations (IR). Even deeper is the question of whether the usual metaphors one uses for geopolitical analysis – triangles, polarity, or even polygonal constructs like an Asia-Pacific security 'quad' – are, in fact, still useful, or whether they should be replaced by more sophisticated terms of visualisation. If it is the latter, a related question is to what extent these new visual, mechanic-geometric metaphors explain behaviour of key states in a polycentric order. This brief attempts to provide a tentative answer to these questions. In particular, this brief proposes a new geometrical picture to visualise leading power triangular relationships in Asia: of four triangles 'glued' into a great-powers tetrahedron.

STRATEGIC TRIANGLES: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Strategic triangles are widely associated with American strategist Henry Kissinger. Kissinger himself noted that the idea of a strategic triangle was implicit in Harry Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson's thinking on China.³ He also observed that French President Charles de Gaulle had examined the possibility of a rift between USSR and China as a way

towards a Franco-Soviet détente in 1957.⁴ As Richard Nixon's National Security Adviser, Kissinger was clear about the main objective of triangular diplomacy: "Our relationships to possible opponents should be such ... that our options towards both of them are always greater than their options towards each other."⁵

While informal descriptions of triangles in IR are common in the literature, stylised descriptions and analyses of strategic triangles are less so. An exception to this is a paper by Dittmer.⁶ He defines a strategic triangle to be some "sort of transactional game among three players," with the proviso that a "game" is to be understood in a more informal sense than traditional game theory.⁷ Transactions for him are exchanges that may be positive or negative (in terms of value) and symmetrical or asymmetrical (in terms of balance). Therefore, there are four types of exchanges possible, describe as (value, balance) pair.⁸ Each edge of a triangle (a bilateral relationship) will be either positive or negative with a given direction of asymmetry.⁹

Dittmer identifies, with these variables, three different types of strategic triangles. They are "the 'ménage à trois', consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the 'romantic triangle', consisting of amity between one 'pivot' player and two 'wing' players, but enmity between each of the latter; and the 'stable marriage', consisting of amity between two of the players and enmity between each and the third."¹⁰

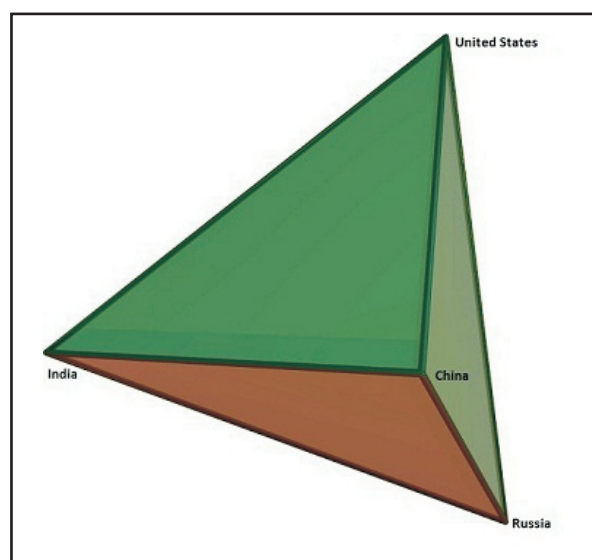
A GREAT-POWERS TETRAHEDRON

A tetrahedron is the simplest shape in three-dimensional space in that other shapes can ultimately be decomposed into tetrahedra. Mathematically speaking, a tetrahedron is a

shape in three-dimensional space with four vertices, four faces, and six edges. The great-power tetrahedron has the following components (Figure 1):

- (1) *Vertices*: US, China, Russia, and India;
- (2) *Edges*: Bilateral relationships, both cooperative as well as conflictual;
- (3) *Faces*: Strategic 'triangles'.¹¹

Figure 1



Points (1) and (3) require explication. In particular, one would need to justify the choice of only these four countries as vertices (and not others, like Japan or Germany, for example). One would also need to explain whether the faces do make strategic triangles in the sense explained in the previous section, and the conditions under which they do. This is to be done by looking at the past conceptualisation and recent history of these triangular relationships.

The choice of the countries (vertices) follows from both practical and conceptual geopolitical reasons. The practical reasons are the following. According to well-known projections, by 2050, China, the United States, and India will be the world's largest, second-largest, and third-

largest economic powers, respectively.¹² Assuming unidirectional fungibility of power, even in the presence of bureaucratic friction within a state, these would make these countries preponderant military powers as well. (In 2017, the US remains the preponderant military power in the world; in the case of China, that its military strength is on an ascent is also obvious. India's still remains a relatively-open question.) The choice of Russia is slightly more controversial given its economic trajectory. But it will most likely remain a major military power, albeit as a 'hybrid state'.¹³ (By 2050, Russia is projected to be the sixth-largest economy in the world that, by no means, makes it an insignificant economic power.) Beyond economic considerations, all four are nuclear powers; all four have significant populations; and all four occupy a large fraction of the world's habitable landmass.

The last point brings one to the conceptual reason for the choice of these four countries. All four are major players in the Eurasian landmass (the United States through its extended deterrence and other historical commitments to western Europe). A Mackinderian perspective of geopolitics would put the Eurasian landmass front and centre of any analysis of the international system. In Mackinder's language, Russia is the 'pivot', China and India the 'inner crescent', and the US the 'outer crescent'.¹⁴ All such future interaction of the four countries will largely determine the future of the Eurasia and the dynamics between the crescents and the pivot.¹⁵

Coming to the faces of the tetrahedron, the four of them (again refer to Figure 1) are the following: (1) Russia-India-China, (2) US-India-China, (3) US-China-Russia and, finally, (4) US-India-Russia. To repeat a point made earlier, these triangular relationships are not – at the face of it in any self-evident way – strategic

triangles in the way Kissinger described the concept. Whether they follow any of the three stylised patterns of triangular behaviour described by Dittmer remains to be examined.

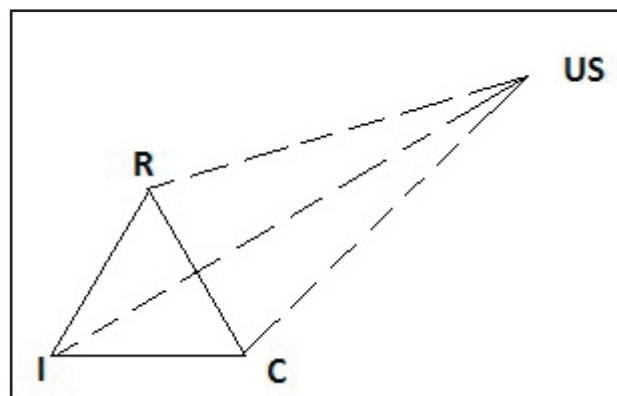
THE FOUR FACES OF ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

Russia-India-China

The Russia-India-China triangle concept has Russian provenance, in an idea that the then Russian Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov pitched in New Delhi in December 1998. In Primakov's conception, strategic partnerships between Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing would become one key way by which American power in the unipolar moment could be balanced.¹⁶ The RIC, as this triangular relationship came to be known, forms the nucleus of political BRICS.¹⁷

But scholars have argued, and with good reasons, that this idea was doomed to fail right from the very beginning.¹⁸ BRICS – and RIC as a subset – continues to falter for two key reasons. One, because of increasing friction between China and India¹⁹ and, two, for the perception among many in New Delhi's strategic community that India and China's cooperation in BRICS and other global-governance platforms has not translated into greater accommodation of Indian interests by China. The essence of the empirical argument that Pant advanced against RIC was that the bilateral relationships between the three countries were much less than what all three individually had with the United States.²⁰ Conceptually, if a triangle (RIC) is to 'balance' a point (US), which was Primakov's vision, then one has to consider all other triangles in the question which have the US as one of the vertices. In other words, the great-powers tetrahedron will have to be considered (Figure 2 should help visualise this situation).

Figure 2



To fit the historical trajectory of Russia-India-China triangular behaviour into Dittmer's terminology: up and until the end of the Cold War, it formed a 'stable marriage' in that the USSR and India had a cordial relationship, and each had reasons for animosity towards China. Primakov wanted a 'ménage à trois' of the three powers. At present, it is difficult to neatly categorise the RIC triangle using Dittmer's terminology.

US-India-China

If the RIC was a classic example of a Mackinderian construct – involving land powers in the heartland and the inner crescent – the US-India-China triangle is a textbook Mahanian story. It was explored as such by Raja Mohan in a recent book.²¹ The gist of Mohan's story is a classic security dilemma that is likely to play out between China and India when it comes to the domination of the Indo-Pacific. As China thrusts outward, ostensibly for commercial reasons, its access to – and control of parts of – the waters of the Indo-Pacific would become a key priority. India too lays claim on large parts of the Indo-Pacific. A security dilemma would thus be born. In Mohan's narrative, like the gods of the story of the Hindu myth of a “Samudra Manthan” (literally, 'the

churning of the ocean'), the US will largely determine the balance of power in the region.

As such, a strategic triangle (involving the three countries) is to be expected. With the US-India relationship on an upturn, especially in the form of military cooperation, since the beginning of the 21st century, and the India-China relationship significantly worsening over the last year, the main story to watch out for with the new administration in the United States is how Donald Trump handles China – and visualises India's role as a leading offshore balancer. Since assuming the presidency in January 2017, Trump has reversed his position on China and, at the same time, has failed to articulate a clear South Asia policy and India's role in it. But Mahanian geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific would suggest that the US-India-China triangle would that be of a 'stable marriage' between the US and India with China as the third party, to use Dittmer's terminology.

US-China-Russia

The most examined strategic triangle in IR theory, that led to the rapprochement between the US and China in 1972, is the US-China-USSR triangle. Richard Nixon, upon being elected to the White House in 1969, quickly noted the worsening relationship between the USSR and China, a nadir of which was the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969. By bringing China to the US side, Nixon wanted to tilt the balance of power away from the USSR as well as—and this is underappreciated—to gain a favourable hand when it came to resolving the quagmire in Vietnam.²² Kissinger noted in his memoirs: “The buildup of Soviet divisions on the border [in 1969] implied that a Soviet Union faced with tensions on two fronts [...] will be ready to explore a political solutions with America, especially if we succeeded in the opening to China [...]”²³


Triangular patterned behaviour is not static and changes with time. Dittmer has noted that between 1949 and 1960, the USSR and China was in a 'stable marriage' with the US as the third party.²⁴ However, between 1970 and 1978, the triangular relationship became a 'romantic triangle' with the US as the 'pivot' player and USSR and China as the 'wing' players following the Nixon-Kissinger triangular diplomacy of 1969-1972.²⁵

Many have read shades of Richard Nixon in Donald Trump – and this has not always meant a compliment.²⁶ However, should Trump engineer a 'reset' of the US-Russia relationship, there is another potential strategic triangle in the making, this time interchanging the roles of Russia and China. The Russia-China relationship is, on the surface, friendly and cooperative. It has also been termed as an 'axis of convenience'.²⁷ The United States looms large over this relationship. Dittmer notes that the unspoken driver of Russia-China relationship is “its greater geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis the American superpower.”²⁸

In a nod to Brzezinski's 'Grand Chessboard,' Lo noted (in 2008, before Crimea, but also before Trump) that “the perfect scenario is for the United States and China to treat Russia as an essential partner in countering the other other's hegemonic ambitions.”²⁹ Many suspected that Trump would warm up to Russia upon assuming office, given Vladimir Putin's support for his presidency. However, this has not turned out to be the case. Trump has described the US-Russia relationship to be at “an all-time low.”³⁰ In particular, Trump's renewed commitment to NATO and his decision to militarily retaliate against the Syrian regime's decision to use chemical weapons against civilians make the possibility of a reset of Russia-America relationship in the near future remote.

US-India-Russia

Soon after Trump's election, the Indian foreign secretary noted that given India's ties with both the United States and Russia, “an improvement in US-Russia ties is therefore not against Indian interests.”³¹ Implicit in this statement was the hope that the US-Russia-India strategic triangle would follow a 'ménage à trois pattern' from a 'romantic triangle' pattern (in Dittmer's terminology). Indeed, in India's quest for a multipolar world it has engaged with both countries, even when the relationship between Russia and the west was far from amicable. For example, India refused to ostracise Putin after the Crimea invasion in 2014 and protested (along with the other BRICS) the Australian suggestion that Russia be suspended from the G20 because of its intransigence.³² India has also (implicitly) backed the Russian position on Syria³³ while continuing to deepen its military cooperation with the United States. However, Moscow remains India's largest supplier of weapons, and between 2012 and 2016, Russia accounted for 68 percent of India's arms imports.³⁴

From Moscow's point of view, as Russia pivots to Asia, it should engage India to the extent that this pivot stops being just a “pivot to China.”³⁵ But the Russia-India relationship remains quite lopsided with the economic leg becoming quickly irrelevant: In 2016, one percent of India's total trade was with Russia; India accounted for 1.2% of Russia's total trade.³⁶ Compare this with the US\$ 114.8-billion bilateral trade in goods and services between the United States and India in the same year.³⁷ Even in the military-sales part of the relationship, cost overruns on Russian acquisitions has dampened India's enthusiasm for acquiring high-end Russian platforms. The Russian decision to hold a joint military exercise with Pakistan in 2016 – and the possibility of a nascent 'China-Pakistan-Russia'³⁸ axis emerging – stands to significantly add to the stress in the India-Russia relationship. If these patterns continue to strengthen, in the US-India-Russia triangular relationship, the US will have much more to offer to India as well as Russia (especially if a US-Russia reset relationship does happen) than what they offer each other. The key variable that would determine the pattern of the triangle would be China. 

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ENDNOTES

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