

The Fallacy in the Russia-India-China Triangle

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Much has been said about the India-China-Russia strategic triangle, a post-Cold War idea mooted by former Russian Premier Yevgeny Primakov.¹ Several strategic thinkers are optimistic about the formation of a strategic triangle but such optimism appears to be misplaced.

The idea of strategic triangle took root with the end of the Cold War when the US assumed the role of global cop. The idea of the triangle raised much hope to build a multi-polar world that would enable the creation of a just and fair international economic and political order.² More importantly, since the end of the Cold War gave primacy to economics than to politics, much enthusiasm arose about a common economic agenda. This augured well for the three great Asian powers, India, China and Russia which shared the common goal of economic reform and modernisation. Being located in a single geopolitical space, they thought of a bonding to promote prosperity, security and stability in the region.

The idea of the strategic triangle got renewed attention in the post-9/11 world order.³ This time Islamic terrorism became an additional factor. China faces separatist forces in Xinjiang which it categorises as terrorism. India has its own concerns in Jammu and Kashmir. Russia fears terrorism in Chechnya.

Though the proponents of the strategic triangle attempted to reduce the anti-US flavour, the anti-US facet still holds ground in the formation of the strategic triangle. The geopolitical map of the world has changed by US position in Central Asia and Afghanistan. This has brought the US alarmingly to the doorsteps of Russia and China.⁴ This has led, China and India which initially showed a lukewarm attitude to Primakov's proposal of a 'strategic Moscow-Delhi-Beijing triangle', to give renewed consideration in 2001. And, again in September this year, when the Foreign Ministers of the three countries held a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. However, the development of a strategic triangle would be unrealistic.

The reasons can be easily found in the mutual suspicion between India and China. It is interesting to note that Jawaharlal Nehru regarded China as a threat for he felt Indian and Chinese cultures had been contesting for supremacy for hundreds of years in Central Asia, Tibet, Burma and the countries of Southeast Asia.⁵ Indeed, India and China are two geopolitical rivals and their interests clash both in the political and economic arena. Both are vying for the same markets. India calls the Central Asian region its 'extended neighbourhood' while to China it is the 'strategic backyard'.⁶

Political analysts talk of a new flashpoint between India and China in ASEAN. Both view the Southeast Asian region as a of market and crucial to their security concerns. In Sudan, China is already playing a proactive role. Recently, India entered the oil sector of Sudan.⁷ Militarily both are building their blue-water capability. While India is attempting to project its naval power through the Indian Ocean and had conducted joint military exercises with the US in the Malacca Straits to the chagrin of China, China is trying to penetrate the Indian Ocean through Myanmar much to the alarm of India.⁸ Given this clash of interests between China and India, it is highly unlikely for them to emerge as strong supporters of the strategic triangle.

Pakistan is yet another major irritant in India-China relations.⁹ China is not likely to give up its strategic alliance with Pakistan. It is China's primary card to block India from emerging as a great Asian power. By playing the Pakistan card, China seeks to keep India embroiled in South Asia. China's ambition of great power status is not only contingent on a strong economy as it is widely known but also on its diplomacy of keeping India tied to the South Asian region. China maintains a fine balance between India and Pakistan so that Pakistan is checked from being too reckless and India does not pose a challenge to it.¹⁰ China's aid to Pakistan is not confined only to transfer of nuclear technology and arms sales. It has shown keen interest in participating in the strategic Gwadar port with financial assistance of US \$248 million.¹¹

Apart from Pakistan, the border issue is another equally thorny issue in India-China relations. In spite of regular JWG meetings and a series of ministerial interactions, there has been no progress in resolving the border issue.

Though ideas on the trilateral cooperation emphasise that it is not directed against any third power, there is the implicit objective of creating a competing power centre against the US. All the three powers are economically dependent on

the US and each of them is seeking to deepen its relationship with the US. But none can afford to annoy the sole super power.

Thirdly, New Delhi is still sceptical about the strategic triangle and rightly so, as present relations between India and US are on the upswing. The Bush administration is seeking a far more active and purposeful cooperation with India. It may not be in the national interest of India to lean to Russia and China at this juncture. Further, viewed bilaterally, although India enjoys extraordinary defence relations with Russia, its trade is minimal, about 15 per cent.¹² Again, China's trade with India is limited compared to that with the US. In the strategic triangle India this represents the weakest angle.

It is Russia, which would gain the most in this strategic triangle. It would help Russia to check NATO's eastward expansion. It would pose as an alternative power bloc to the US and boost Russia's role in world politics. Some analysts say that Russia's aim is to solidify Moscow's place between East and the West, Atlantic and the Pacific, NATO and China. Though Russia's aim of being part of the strategic triangle is yet to materialise, its urgency is low with the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) under the stewardship of China. Though formed with the aim of countering terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, the SCO has a larger goal of counteracting US unilateralism.

From the very beginning, China has shown apathy to the idea of the strategic triangle. Its foreign policy objective is grounded on a strong sentiment of bilateralism. The recent thaw in Sino-Indian relations is not indicative of any fundamental policy shift in Chinese foreign policy. China calls this gesture of renewed friendship towards India as 'readjustment'.¹³ It does not want to dilute its warm relations with its long-term ally Pakistan. This policy of readjustment aims at maintaining cordial relations with both India and Pakistan separately and bilaterally.

In sum, the popularity of the strategic triangle is mainly at the Track-II level. It is unlikely to seriously influence the official policy in New Delhi. India must not be swayed by Russia's rhetoric of the strategic triangle. At the same time, instead of confining its relationship with Russia to defence ties, India should expand its commercial ties.

The idea of the strategic triangle need not be dumped as futile since a more positive and persuasive global role of India-China-Russia would contribute to a more stable world order.

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