China-U.S.-India:

Is a New Triangle Taking Shape?

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Abstract: Triangle relationships usually occur between three parties that are neither friends nor allies. The subtle nature of the triangle, wherein change of one pair of bilateral ties impacts the other two geopolitically, is determined by many factors, among which pursuit for balance of power in the changing landscape of geopolitics is usually the most decisive. In this context, the interactions among China, the U.S. and India in recent years seem to have brought up the birth of a new triangle in international politics. It is the U.S. that pushed for this interactive formula in the first place when India's role and function as a counterweighing element was perceived. The dynamics have remained unchanged since the U.S. decided to make a nuclear deal with India despite various difficulties. However, China, the subject against which India was seen as a counterweight, is trying to keep itself away from the game in order to diminish the impacts of these interactions. Dealing with the other two nations separately, China continues to work on improving and redefining China-India relations not because of closer U.S.-Indian ties, but rather, because of its perception of India's status as both its close neighbor and another rising power. This particular situation puts India in a position to play its own balancing game to maximize its self-interests. India's pursuit for global power status will be promoted by its attempts toward achieving economic growth and military

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buildup. In both areas, India is likely to obtain more leverage in keeping a balanced approach to handling China and the U.S. In that sense, the geopolitical model between the three is already taking shape, if only perceptually, though it is still far away from substantial operation in *real politik* terms. Given the different sizes and power statuses of China and India, the U.S. may find it difficult to manage its relations with both nations, and the future of the triangle will thus remain largely uncertain.

Keywords: Triangle relationship; U.S. motives; China's options; Indian responses; triangle prospects.

A triangle relationship is one of the most common relationships in international politics. Based on three pairs of bilateral relations, a triangle will take shape under certain conditions. In most cases, a triangle will not exist among three parties that are friends or allies because there is no need, nor will it do when two parties are friends or allies with the third being their common enemy—in this case, the two allies may work together against the enemy, rendering most subtle interactions among the three parties unnecessary. Nevertheless, a triangle could be built up among three enemies due to the traditional wisdom that the enemy of an enemy could become a friend. When “friendship” develops out of that principle, it is clearly not as genuine as understood in its common sense. Also, a triangle could be built up among three parties who are real friends or even enemies without any public declaration. As a result, interactions among the three parties may highly depend on their respective status, perception and strategy. For example, the way party A deals with party B will affect party C's behavior due to the established model of interaction among the three parties. China-U.S.-Soviet Union interactions during the Cold War can be regarded as the enemy model, while China, the U.S. and Japan framed a much more benevolent type of triangle after the reestablishment of China-U.S. diplomatic ties. This article tries to answer the question of whether China, the U.S. and India are likely to form a new triangle when both China and India are rising powers.

Shifts of the U.S.'s India Strategy

The U.S. used to handle China and India with separate approaches. It is interesting to note that the U.S. perceived India as a potential rival and even

threat when India achieved independence after World War II. According to some declassified documents of the State Department, the U.S. observed political trends in South Asia with a purely geopolitical view right after the British withdrawal. Due to India's continuous efforts to consolidate its territory in the wake of the India-Pakistan partition, the trend was clear that India would become a dominant power based on its huge resources on the subcontinent. The State Department report stressed the implication of having a new power in the subcontinent, arguing that a unified and powerful India after independence could constitute a challenge to American predominance in Asia. That report was issued in 1950 on the basis of an American assessment of what was perceived as India's aggressive gesture to annex territories, especially India's inflexible position over the Kashmir issue, which had already led to a war with Pakistan in 1947. The American conclusion therefore pointed to a new balancing strategy to support Islamic countries in the region represented by Pakistan,¹ and this strategy had been implemented throughout the Cold War period. In retrospect, the U.S.' Asia strategy started from a simple assumption that the U.S. predominance in Asia had to prevail and that potential challenges from any country must be thwarted. In South Asia, Pakistan was first mobilized to create a balance of power.

The rationale of the U.S.'s Asia strategy is simple, while the target that the U.S. aims at for maintaining this strategy has changed from time to time. During the Cold War era, the hostile relationship between the U.S. and India triggered an Indian-Soviet alliance in 1971. A balance was thus made in South Asia until the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result of the Soviet disintegration, India was marginalized in the international arena, for it was neither a challenger to the U.S. nor a strong power in Asia. During the 1990s, nuclear proliferation became the major concern of the U.S. in the subcontinent, and India was picked up as a particular case for the U.S. to watch over. Ironically, since the U.S. failed to stop Indian nuclear tests in May 1998 despite strenuous efforts, its perception of India substantially changed afterwards. The U.S. and India quickly launched negotiation over nuclear issues, which opened a new page of their bilateral relations. In 2000, President Clinton realized his state visit to India a few months before his

¹Foreign Relations of the United States 1950, Vol. 5: *The Near East, South Asia, and Africa* (Washington D.C.: State Department, 1978), p. 1499.

presidency ended. In New Delhi, he stressed the importance of India in the U.S.'s Asia strategy. In the same year when the U.S. presidential campaign was under way, Condoleezza Rice, then foreign policy adviser to Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that

(America) should pay closer attention to India's role in the regional balance. There is a strong tendency conceptually to connect India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one.²

It was therefore not accidental that the real reconciliation between the U.S. and India took place during the first term of the George W. Bush presidency when Ms. Rice became National Security Adviser.

This turning point occurred not because of Ms. Rice's prediction that India would soon emerge as a great power, but because of China's rapid rise. In March 2006, the U.S. and India officially signed the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement in New Delhi during President Bush's state visit, which marked a high level political consensus that the U.S. would help India develop into a global power. The news that the U.S. wanted to develop civilian nuclear

The U.S.-India nuclear deal in 2006 marked a fundamental change of the U.S.'s India policy.

cooperation with India despite India's status of non-signatory state of the NPT (Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) shocked the world, and India hailed it as a significant breakthrough in its diplomacy. As a matter of fact, even before that agreement was concluded, the U.S. had already decided to make the nuclear deal with India and included the China factor into its India policy, since the geopolitical landscape in Asia had greatly changed and China's rise as a great power was increasingly clear.

Interestingly, both the U.S. and China were deeply concerned about India's nuclear tests, while the U.S. first reached reconciliation with India

²Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interests," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January/February 2000), p. 56.

when President Clinton paid his state visit to India in 2000. Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's milestone visit to Beijing in 2003 was also perceived as a breakthrough of the cold China-India ties after the nuclear tests, during which the two sides agreed to establish what was known as a "constructive partnership."³ The U.S. reconciliatory efforts went ahead of those of China possibly due to the fact that the U.S. had realized the potential role India could play in the following years in Asia's geopolitical reconstruction. Instead of nuclear threats, the U.S. perceived India's nuclear development as capacity enhancement that would create a new balance in Asian geopolitics.

The U.S. did not abandon its perception of India as a potential threat until G. W. Bush took office.

Therefore, it was not until the George W. Bush administration was in place that the U.S.'s India policy saw a fundamental shift, symbolized by the U.S.-India civilian nuclear agreement. Apparently, President Bush changed the Clinton administration's Asia policy focusing primarily on China and began to place more emphasis on Japan and India, because the Bush administration saw China as a *strategic competitor* in the first

place.⁴ Although whether the Clinton administration viewed China as a competitor needs further discussion, what occurred substantially is that the U.S.'s India policy has embarked on a new track since the civilian nuclear deal was settled. If the assumption that the U.S. perceived China as a strategic competitor is correct, it may also be argued that the U.S.-India-China triangle was about to take shape then, because of the nuclear deal.

China's Cautious Reaction to Closer U.S.-India Ties

The U.S. perception of China as a strategic competitor is not new to China. Actually, it has become a commonly held Chinese belief that under no circumstance will the U.S. accept China as a genuine partner, since their

³The Declaration on Principles of the Bilateral Relationship and Comprehensive Co-operation between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, *People's Daily*, June 24, 2003.

⁴Sylvia Mishra, "India and the United States: New Directions in Defense Partnership," ORF Occasional Paper #72 (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, September 2015), p. 5.

relations have experienced too many ups and downs in the past decades. The only “perception gap” may be that China does not see itself as a competitor of the U.S. simply because China is still in its early stage of socio-economic development, with a long way to go to achieve its national goals. Yet in the U.S., many analysts argue that the power equation either in Asia or in the global context has been changing to China’s favor with China’s rapid rise. This gap could lead to different behaviors.

On the Chinese side, the leadership continues to reiterate the nation’s identity as a developing country despite its great achievements. The point about great achievements implies that China has benefited enormously from the U.S.-led international system. Against the American suspicion that China is likely to be a challenger, Chinese President Xi Jinping argued that China has been and will remain to be “a participant, constructor and contributor to the existing international system,”⁵ though the notion is yet to be accepted by the world. In September 2013 when President Xi visited Kazakhstan, he announced the initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and one month later, he again called for new efforts to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road when addressing the Indonesian Parliament. These currently renowned “Belt and Road” Initiatives are based on China’s belief that development is the first priority of most nations, especially for China and its neighbors. According to some Chinese scholars, the Belt and Road initiatives are the product of a high level meeting held in Beijing in November 2013, with the theme of China’s periphery diplomacy, where all Chinese top leaders and senior officials gathered to discuss how to better implement China’s neighboring policy. At that meeting, President Xi argued that the Belt and Road initiatives aim at identifying strategic commons and promoting cooperation with China’s neighbors.⁶ Despite some difficulties, including unresolved disputes and historic legacies, China would like to work closely with neighboring countries by leveraging its huge natural and human resources as well as its capital advantage. Although quite a lot of

⁵President Xi Jinping’s Address at the Welcome Dinner by the Washington State Government and other US Friendly Organizations, September 22, 2015, *People’s Daily*, September 24, 2015, Beijing.

⁶“Xi Jinping zai Zhoubian Waijiao Gongzuo Zuotanhui shang Fabiao Zhongyao Jianghua [Xi Jinping Delivered Keynote Speech a Working Conference on Neighborhood Diplomacy],” *People’s Daily*, October 25, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1025/c1024-23332318.html>.

people have expressed their concerns about China's approach, China is indeed making efforts to redirect regional focus onto economic cooperation and growth from security and geopolitical concerns.

China has refrained from a balance-of-power approach in dealing with the U.S., but tried to enhance their relations while increasing its constructive engagement with the existing international system.

Although China's recent moves are not necessarily regarded as responses to the U.S. perception, its intention to project an image of itself as a constructive participant in the international system is obvious. The key message China would like to convey may be that it is going to challenge neither the status quo superpower nor the current international system. In this regard, the process of systematic transformation is likely to occur in a way different from what the U.S. has presumed. The so-called "Thucydides trap" lays out the prospect of structural conflicts between a rising power and a status quo power.

While many Americans tend to believe in the logic of such a trap, China argues that there is no such trap unless big powers repeatedly make wrong judgments, then they could dig out the trap for themselves.⁷ In other words, China does not believe the traditional balance-of-power approach is suitable to handle the issue, and thus it is taking active measures vis-à-vis the development of U.S.-India relations.

First of all, China and India have decided to define their bilateral relationship as *development partners*⁸ when President Xi Jinping visited New Delhi in September 2014. As the Joint Statement from that visit pointed out, the two countries are fully aware of their divergence and disputes, yet they will stick to cooperative approaches for development. With this perception, China does not regard the ever closer U.S.-India ties as anti-China. Rather,

⁷"Xi Jinping Chuxi Huashengdunzhou Dangdi Zhengfu he Meiguo Youhao Tuanti Lianhe Huanying Yanhui bing Fabiao Yanjiang [Xi Jinping Attends Welcoming Dinner and Delivers Speech at Seattle in Washington State]," *People's Daily*, September 23, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0923/c1024-27624017.html>.

⁸"Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Yindu Gongheguo Guanyu Goujian Gengjia Jinmi de Fazhan Huoban Guanxi de Lianhe Shengming [China-India Joint Statement on Building a Closer Partnership for Development]," *Xinhua News*, September 19, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-09/19/c_1112555977.htm.

China understands India's approaches to handle the U.S. as necessary steps to strive for economic benefits, especially when Prime Minister Modi reiterates India's huge demands for foreign investment.

Second, when the U.S. moves closer to India with strategic considerations, China tries its best to communicate with relevant parties in order to better understand its implications. China carefully states its positions and watches the strategic evolution of the regional order, for the declining role of the U.S. has issued warnings to China and other power players in the world. In such a context, China tends to assess the U.S. behavior with suspicion, for it is concerned about what the U.S. really wants to achieve by approaching India. From the Chinese perspective, there is almost no doubt that the U.S. will make every effort to maintain its superiority in the Asia Pacific and thus may take India as a counterweight against China. Based on such assumptions, China has to be prepared for any possible scenario resulting from the U.S.'s India policy that seems to generate negative impact on Asia.

Third, China has been unwilling to participate in the power game either in the context of the Thucydides trap or balance of power, for its strategic pursuit in the region and the world is quite limited. However, China has observed some subtle development in the case of U.S.-India relations. Though the Malabar military exercise in the Indian Ocean originated from the U.S.-India bilateral defense agreement, India eventually invited Japan to the joint exercise in 2009 with the U.S. encouragement. In October 2015, the three countries again conducted the trilateral drill with anti-submarine combat as one of the major themes. It is difficult for China to judge these exercises as positive events in the region. It is also worth noting that India has well accepted the rebalancing concept simply because it is happy to be seen as a big power in global politics though its actual capacity has yet to reach that level. The complexity lies in the fact that both China and India are rising powers, and therefore "competition" is the term often used to describe the nature of their bilateral ties. With its economy developed to a much higher level, China does not look at India in a competitive way, while India believes in the significance of its big power status in order to compete with China. The divergent views between China and India may be demonstrated through policy options they are making respectively. The Malabar exercise is a case in point. Despite China's hope that Japan would not be engaged, India insisted on dragging the Japanese navy

into the game. India's decision is largely based on its strategic calculation of what is going on in the West Pacific where China finds great difficulties dealing with Japan. Dragging Japan into the Indian Ocean would further complicate the situation, which seems to fit what India expects there.

Fourth, although India has demonstrated enormous potential in regional economy and politics, the China-U.S.-India triangle is far from taking solid shape in the eyes of China. China still deals with the U.S. and India using the bilateral approach. There is not enough evidence to show that one party's approach to the other would significantly impact the behavior of the third party regardless of the substantial change of the U.S.'s India policy and India's rising status in the international system. China continues to pursue a friendly and cooperative approach toward India, with the belief that both countries share more common interests than differences. Besides, China has learned from history that the vigorous pursuit of an independent foreign policy is India's unshakable tradition for realizing its great power dream. In this sense, India would like to play the balance-of-power game with its own rules and demands, instead of being used as a card by any other power.

China endeavors to strengthen ties with India while remaining cautious of the dynamics of U.S.-India relations and the U.S. rebalancing steps.

Last but not least, China has been developing its Indian policy based on its own calculation of interests with changing foci. For instance, the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Economic Corridor initiative resulted from China's domestic adjustment of economic structure as well as the external demands in China's peripheral countries, which has now become China's major strategy in South Asia. As an important part of China's peripheries, South Asia will play a decisive role in the perceived outcome

of the Belt and Road initiatives. Thus, China will do its best to maintain and improve relations with India no matter what the U.S. or any other major power might think of India. In other words, one might argue that China regards India as a significant factor given India's size and potentials. Had the U.S. not changed its India policy or adopted the rebalancing strategy, China would still have decided to seek cooperation with India. At this point, the Chinese approach towards the perceived China-U.S.-India triangle reflects a tendency to keep distance from the balance-of-power game. Instead of

giving weight to the new development of U.S.-India relations, China is likely to work with India toward achieving common benefits. In short, China will stick to the bilateral approach in handling China-India relations and try to reduce the negative impact of the U.S. rebalancing maneuvers.

India's Balancing Role in the Trilateral Power Game

As a rising power, India is embracing ever more ambitious goals. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the general election in a landslide victory and Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014, India has been pursuing its goal of an Indian century with its democratic institutions, dividends of young population and market potentials.⁹ The commitments Prime Minister Modi made to the Indian constituents and the world at large conveyed a clear message that India was determined to revitalize itself as a nation. India's national revitalization must include its status as a global power, which has been communicated by generations of Indian leaders.

India's self-esteem creates a lot of expectations and moves. To be a global power would first and foremost require a nation to be more proactive in global diplomacy. Prime Minister Modi seems fully aware of this point and has embarked on a series of global visits to major countries and hosted some return visits in Delhi during his first year in office. With regard to the U.S., not only did Mr. Modi officially visit Washington in September 2014, but he also welcomed President Obama three months later in New Delhi. The frequency of the U.S.-India summit was unprecedented. President Obama realized two "firsts" by his visit in January 2015—he was the first American president who attended India's military parade and celebration of the Day of the Republic, and who visited India twice during his presidency.¹⁰ In the meantime, India-China interactions have unfolded at a

⁹"Yindu Zongli Modi Zaimei Yanshuo: Ershiyi Shiji Keneng Shuyu Yindu [Indian Prime Minister Modi's Address in the U.S.: 21st Century May Belong to India]," China News Net, September 28, 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/gj/2014/09-29/6640593.shtml>.

¹⁰President Obama's first visit to India was in 2010, during which he declared U.S. support for India's desire for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, a commitment that won huge applause in India. See also "Aobama: Zhichi Yindu Chengwei Anlihui Changren Lishiguo [Obama Declares Support for India's Membership in UN Security Council]," China News Net, November 9, 2010, <http://news.21cn.com/world/guojisaomiao/2010/11/09/7928957.shtml>.

similar pace. President Xi Jinping paid a successful visit to India in September 2014, just before Mr. Modi flew to Washington, D.C., and Mr. Modi paid a return visit to China in May 2015. All these diplomatic moves indicated some new trends.

Above all, the rapid rise of India has attracted worldwide attention, and almost all big powers are trying to build up their India policies in a proper way. It is interesting to note that global leaders seem to stress the significance of Mr. Modi and his party's overwhelming victory in the general election, and his commitments to leading India to meet the Indian people's expectations also reveal some of India's external goals. Although India's status as a global power remains debatable, the international community seems to have accepted such a prospect for India in the coming decade.

Moreover, India itself is increasingly ambitious for global power status. It is not only in terms of economic growth that India believes it will eventually surpass China, but also in the political and security arenas. India's strategic ambition lies in its genuine status of independent power in the global context, pointing to strategic autonomy and equal footing with the most powerful nations. In pursuit of these goals, India would try to leverage all its resources to maximize its prospect of becoming a genuine global power, and the American perception of India as a counterweight against China's rise is precisely such a leverage. From the Indian perspective, being seen as such is different from being maneuvered. A proper

utilization of the U.S. perception would reward India with additional resources in its strategic pursuit. Of course, this kind of utilization would also have some potential risks for India: offending China in any way would be costly for India. More seriously, as India's founding father Jawaharlal Nehru argued, being manipulated by other countries would only force India to give up her own views and follow others on specific issues in order to please them for some benefits.¹¹

With its lasting ambition to become a global power, India is seeking to play a balancing role between the U.S. and China.

¹¹Jawaharlal Nehru, *Independence and After: A Collection of Speeches* (New York: John Day Company, 1950), p. 218.

However, the subtle difference is extremely difficult to grasp in terms of India's policy options. In examining India's policies in the past decade, one may conclude that India has tried its best to maintain a balance when dealing with the U.S. and China. During Mamonhan Singh's administration, India's relations with both powers developed rapidly while having different foci. In India-U.S. relations, political trust and security cooperation have been projected to an unprecedented high level. The U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation agreement signed in 2006 was perceived as India's significant breakthrough in diplomacy. During Obama's presidency, it further turned out to be the new president's commitment that the U.S. would support India for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, promote bilateral defense cooperation and increase arms sales to India.

In the case of China, India's leadership worked hard with its Chinese counterpart for common grounds and mutual benefits, which have been demonstrated through increasing economic cooperation between the two countries. The China-India bilateral trade started with less than US\$ 2 billion at the beginning of the 21st century and is calculated to have reached about 70 billion at present,¹² making China the largest trading partner of India. Both sides have adopted a number of effective measures to handle differences in climate change issues even when both countries actually lack mutual trust and each has security concerns with the other. By doing so, India hopes to create favorable circumstances for its socio-economic development, a priority that Prime Minister Modi has strongly reiterated.

To sum up, India's position has been upgraded in the international system due to many factors, and the most important one is its own growth and development. India's determination to become a global power is unquestionable, but this does not necessarily mean that India has already realized such a role as equal player in a symmetric equation of power triangle. In the current phase, India is more likely to be perceived and utilized by other powers as a card, which India will definitely reject. More precisely, India's behavior may be interpreted as a balancing approach. Instead of being manipulated as a counterweight, India would like to play an active role with its own leverages between big powers, in order to maximize its benefits. So far, India's approach has proven basically successful

¹²A calculation based on data collected by the Ministry of Commerce of China, http://countryreport.mofcom.gov.cn/indexType.asp?p_coun=%D3%A1%B6%C8.

considering the breakthrough of the nuclear isolation by the U.S. and the ever closer U.S.-India defense cooperation, as well as the fast development of economic exchange and a normal track of China-India ties.

Reality and Prospects of the China-U.S.-India Triangle

The triangle relationship in international politics is usually based on three pairs of bilateral relations. The three pairs impact each other in a geopolitical way and changes within any pair would lead to significant geopolitical responses by the other two. Judging by this criterion, the China-U.S.-India triangle is still in its infancy, and a substantial interactive model is yet to be established. In history, the U.S.-China-Soviet triangle was a classic example when the U.S. first realized the role of China in its contention against the Soviet Union despite the fact that China was a much weaker power then and that the three parties were by no means in any form of symmetric balance. Is the United States playing the same game in its Indian policy? To answer this question requires a comprehensive review of the geopolitical situation in Asia and the U.S. strategy in the region.

It is doubtless that the U.S. is concerned about China's rise in Asia and has to address such concern through either engagement or containment—or both. The U.S. would continue to make every effort to maintain its superiority over all other nations, and China is not an exception. The U.S. could not stop China's fast development, but it has other options. Fifteen years ago, Ms. Rice already pointed out the possibility of the U.S. rebalancing to Asia, and the current situation would only provide more incentives for the superpower to make more effort in this regard. A triangle between the U.S., China and India may well fit into the U.S. strategic assumption, which is constantly growing with India's increasing capacity. If the U.S. as the most powerful side among the three parties has the incentives to push ahead the triangle relationship, it is likely that such interactions among the three could get stronger.

However, China has not shown great interest in this game. For the sake of its own strategic goal, China would prefer to reduce possible impacts from the game through its own approaches. Its Belt and Road initiatives are one of the many cases illustrating China's approach to maintaining mutually beneficial relations with its neighbors, among which India occupies a significant position. While some of China's neighbors might be suspicious

of China's capacities and intentions, China's development over the past decades are mostly perceived as a big contribution to Asia and the world at large. Based on this evaluation, China will continue to pursue common development and prosperity with its neighbors despite existing disputes and differences. China's India policy is a typical case. In less than a year, the heads of the two states have realized mutual visits resulting in a number of positive developments for their bilateral ties. Also, the two countries have agreed to further develop their relations beyond the bilateral context as development partners, which has already created regional and global impacts in many areas.¹³ China has taken notice of India's expanding role in regional and global affairs. India's interaction with the U.S. is perceived by China as India's attempt to attain a better position in the international system, which might but not necessarily affect China-India relations in a negative way. In other words, China will carefully observe the interactions between the U.S. and India. However, China's approach to handling the two nations remain unchanged, that is to deal with them separately as two pairs of bilateral relations with their own respective merits. From the Chinese perspective, the geopolitical triangle among the three countries has not yet taken its shape. Even if the game is on-going, China will prefer to diminish its possible impacts rather than proactively participate in it, for the game could bring destructive outcomes to China's strategic goals.

In contrast, India is eager to enhance its international status by maximizing its interactions with big powers, the U.S. and China in particular. From the Indian perspective, both the U.S. and China could provide diplomatic and economic resources, though in different ways. The unique position of India has allowed it to be a significant beneficiary in this complex game, including its breakthrough of nuclear isolation and economic development.

India's approaches to handling both the U.S. and China in a balanced way seem to have worked quite well so far. The China-U.S. relations are mixed

Despite strong promotion of the U.S., the strategic triangle can hardly materialize in the foreseeable future.

¹³"Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Yindu Gongheguo Lianhe Shengming [The Joint Declaration of the PRC and the Republic of India]," *Xinhua News*, May 15, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/15/c_1115301080.htm.

with so many bilateral and global issues to address, and in frequent interactions between China and the U.S., India hardly comes up as an issue. What is left for India to consider might be the possible impact of closer U.S.-India ties as compared to China-India relations, which is probably negative because of the U.S.'s vague strategic intentions. Even if India really embraces the intention to challenge China in a certain way, there is no reason for Indian strategists to act for the sake of U.S. interests. This is also what strategic autonomy is all about, a goal India has pursued for decades.

In conclusion, the development of the China-U.S.-India triangle relationship still shows lots of uncertainties. Although the U.S. seems to act as the driving force, it can hardly decide the format or structure of the power game, for its own capacity to shape the international system has been declining. The paradox of the U.S. strategy is that the U.S. might make better use of India as a counterweight when India is weak, but a weak India cannot play a strong enough role to meet U.S. expectations. This is why the U.S. would like to help India become a global power. However, the more powerful India is, the more strategic autonomy it would have, thus making it less possible for the U.S. to set the agenda. With both countries being rising powers, China-India relations are deeply rooted in competition and cooperation with their own historic legacies and existing problems regardless of U.S. intentions. Given the reality that China and India are close neighbors, and also working partners for common interests, it would be difficult for India to put itself in a game that is hard to control and may trigger new risks of antagonizing China. Therefore, although India rarely shows opposition to the U.S. Asia strategy, and even pretends to be an ally of the U.S., its interests in playing the game would be very limited.

As the geopolitical landscape changes in Asia, major players have begun to adjust their strategies in order to strive for better status. The U.S.'s Asia strategy has already triggered chain reactions in the region. The so-called China-U.S.-India triangle relationship is well underway as a strategic assumption, yet it has not fully unfolded as a geopolitical game. Looking into the future, some scenarios might be taken into account. One is that India's capacity continues to develop on a fast track according to Mr. Modi's ambitious argument for an Indian century. It is imaginable that India would finally come up to the world stage as a global challenger to the U.S. dominance of the international system. In this case, India would also become China's major competitor, which makes the triangle relationship less

likely or necessary. Another scenario is that China's unstoppable growth quickly removes disparity between China and the U.S., and the two powers would have to work together and focus more on bilateral interactions in order to defend their common interests. If that happens, India's role would become much less significant, which would also make the triangle less likely and workable. Since the three parties are neither friends nor enemies, it can be said that the conditions for creating a geopolitical triangle always exist, and it has actually begun to develop. Nevertheless, it is far from being mature and may remain so in the foreseeable future.