INVERGE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
https://invergejournals.com/
ISSN (Online): 2959-4359, ISSN (Print): 3007-2018
Volume 4 Issue 3, 2025

U.S.-SINO-INDIA RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STRATEGIC RIVALRY AND REGIONAL ORDER

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v4i3.309

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Article History:
Received: 10.08.2025
Accepted: 06.09.2025
Published: 30.09.2025

Abstract

The changing dynamics of the relationship among the United States, China and India have emerged as one of the most important strategic triangles that frame our current understanding of international politics and the Asian regional order. The evolution of U.S.-Sino-India relations from the pre-1970s era to the present, based on political, economic, and strategic relationships among the three major powers, is examined in this research article. The study examines how the remnants of colonialism, ideological schisms, borders, enmities, shifts in Cold War alignments, and changing geopolitical realities have informed bilateral and trilateral relations over time. Low levels of U.S.-China hostility, India's balancing of China in the nonalignment realm until the late 1940s, and outright military confrontation during the Sino-Indian border wars of 1962 can largely explain important regional dynamics in South Asia throughout much of the Cold War. Beyond these developments, the article examines how the Sino-Soviet split, the U.S.-China rapprochement and India's strategic turn from both powers influenced its foreign policy behaviour in this period. The evolution of globalization, economic reforms, nuclear politics, and the rise of China and India as major powers shifted regional and global strategic calculations in the post-Cold War period. The 21st century study promotes the thinking that strategic competition is increasing between the U.S. and China while expanding U.S.-India strategic cooperation in defense, trade and Indo-Pacific Security. The relations between China and India, on the other hand, are characterized by a territorial and geopolitical rivalry in terms of regional influence and security concerns. The method of this research is a qualitative secondary source of literary work such as books, journal articles, official documents, policy reports and scholarly analysis with historical approach. The study is realistic and balances powers in view of allies, strategic awareness and action for the three states. Finally, the book emphasizes the triangulated links between the US, China and India as the key to any future regional order in Asia and beyond.

Keywords: U.S.-China, India Relations, Strategic Rivalry, Indo-Pacific, Cold War, Regional Order, South Asia, Balance of Power, International Relations

1. Introduction

The geopolitics of USA-China-India relationship has been a key factor in the recent strategic update of the South Asia region for years not only for the countries concerned but also for its neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan. These three dynamic states in the world have established an interweaving network of political commitments, disputes and strategic alliances that have shaped the socio-economic environment and how the region is protected. Pakistan is at the crossroads of these three great powers and must be aware of the

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evolution of inter-connections between the three and its impact on the foreign policy, security and economic development of Pakistan. As the world moves towards multipolarity, the dynamics between the US and the Chinese Empire, and subsequently with India, have been at the core of the future trajectory of the South Asian region, Pakistan is always at the cross-section of great power inter-state competences (Baqai & Wasi, 2020).

Over the years, the US-China-India triangle has changed depending on various factors from ideological to economic, security and other considerations. The ties, especially from 2013 onwards have seen significant changes with immediate impact on Pakistan. All of these have made a significant difference in the geopolitical climate of the South Asian region, from growing tensions between the United States and China, to Washington and New Delhi strengthening military ties, to ongoing Sino-Indo competition. In the midst of the shifting rivalries and alliances, Pakistan has opportunities, but it has also faced challenges; in the context of these three powers, Pakistan will have to play its cards prudently not only to safeguard its national interests but also to ensure stability in the region (Bhuiyan & Yi, 2025).

This study aims to look back at the development of relations between the US, formerly China, and current-day India through important events, policy shifts and strategic vectors that have determined the math of geopolitics in South Asia. It is important to sketch out a bit of the history of these inter-power relationships, however, before 1970 so that an important background is provided to this complicated relationship. The contours of these relations affecting the Pakistani strategic environment, foreign policy and security related challenges and economic opportunities also have been analysed. In a fluid global geopolitical landscape, the US-China-India trilateral will continue to define the future of South Asia, and Pakistan's role in this future, in an ever-changing world. Hence, to analyse how these relationships have changed their nature overtime and how it shapes or will be shaping Pakistan's strategic interests provides an understanding of the historical context of bilateral links.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Scholarly analyses of U.S.-China-India relations are mainly realist and neorealist in nature. The fact that states balance against rising powers is why India has slowly come under the sway of the U.S. as China rose. Waltz (1979) states that this is how states react to rising powers, and that is why India came more under the sway of the U.S. than anything else when China rose. Mearsheimer (2014) also anticipates greater U.S.-China rivalry as a natural development of the power transition.

Theoretical Perspectives on Great Power Relations

The United States-China-India relationship has been studied in great depth under the prism of realism and the modern version of realism, Neorealism. Realist scholars contend that states must strive for survival, security, and power in an anarchic international system in which these are key state goals in foreign policy (Waltz, 1979). In this construct, the emergence of new powers will inevitably bring about strategic balancing and competition between the states. China has been strengthening its military and economic power, leading U.S. and Indian foreign strategies to adapt to maintain their dominance in the international order. In his view, strategic competition between the United States and China is a familiar feature of international politics as states continuously strive to exercise the greatest influence, and to stop the rise of other regional hegemons, Mearsheimer (2014) argues.

Another aspect of the changing triangular relationship between the three states is explained by the balance-of-power theory. Over the past three decades, China's power has grown considerably, and the U.S. has been building ties with other powers in the region, especially India, Japan and Australia, to balance strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. India's increased engagement with the U.S. can thus be seen as a balancing act to neutralize China's influence in the region. Theories give them an analytical base and a background on the evolving alliance shifts and strategic calculations of U.S.-China-India relations.

Evolution of U.S.–China Relations

U.S. – China relations are among the most important bilateral relations today in international politics, according to the literature. The Cold War, ideological differences and geopolitical competition created a longstanding period of hostility between Washington and Beijing. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the escalation of the Korean War, suspicions and distrust grew between both

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sides, and decades of diplomatic isolation and strategic confrontation ensued.

But the geopolitical landscape underwent a major transformation after the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1960s and the U.S.-China rapprochement that began in the early 1970s. This rapprochement, it is argued, was not triggered by a convergence of ideas but by a strategic thrust against the Soviet influence and both nations were looking to balance the Russian power. Economic engagement has been a hallmark of the post-Cold War partnership. Since China joined WTO back in 2001, the economies of the two countries have become more interdependent, and at the same time more competitive.

Recent scholarship has highlighted that the age of strategic partnership between the U.S. and China has turned strategic competition, through competition in trade, technology, military modernization, and regional influence. The U.S. "Pivot to Asia" policy, worries over the South China Sea and the trade disputes launched under Trump are frequent triggers mentioned for an "engagement to strategic competition" shift. The relationship is becoming an important element in understanding the future of international order, as scholars increasingly make it an important factor in shaping it.

India's Foreign Policy and Strategic Autonomy

The notion of strategic autonomy is an important aspect of India's policy in foreign affairs, which has long been discussed in the country. Jawaharlal Nehru was the pioneer of the policy of nonalignment after India became independent in 1947. This policy aimed at maintaining Indian Sovereignty and in order not to be caught in the middle between the two Cold War blocs. Despite India's friendly ties with both superpowers, as the Soviet Union increased its security cooperation with India, a rift formed between the two nations.

After the Cold War India's foreign policy changed to a great extent. India's economic liberalization begun in 1991 fostered a greater linkage with the world economy and greater opportunities for strategic partnerships. Various scholars have pointed out that Indian Foreign Policy shifted from the concept of nonalignment to a more flexible stance, termed "multi-alignment" by Indian scholars, which enabled India to work with more than one major power at a time without losing its strategic independence.

The bilateral 2005 U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement is often cited as a turning point in the U.S.–India relationship. The deal marked not just the growing international stature of India but also pledged greater cooperation in the areas of defence, technology and maritime security. According to the contemporary literature, India's relations with the United States are becoming sensitive to common concerns about the rise of China in the region.

China–India Relations and Strategic Competition

China–India relations are one of the most complicated bilateral relations in Asia. The literature highlights the unresolved territorial conflicts, especially around Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, as one of the primary issues of tension. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 is a significant event that continues to shape strategic perceptions and policy decision-making in both countries.

In addition to the territorial issue, scholars note that competition for regional influence is an important aspect of China–India relations. New Delhi's recent concerns about regional encirclement have stemmed from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in South Asia, increasing Chinese economic influence and strategic ties with its neighbours. The security cooperation among India, the United States, Japan and Australia, along with India's inclusion in the Quad, has been seen as a reaction to China's ambitions in the region.

Meanwhile, substantial economic interdependence between China and India has been recognized in the literature. In spite of the political tensions and occasional border conflicts, bilateral trade has continued to grow and is a complex area of simultaneous competition and cooperation.

Pakistan in the U.S.–China–India Strategic Triangle

Pakistan is a unique country in the strategic triangle. In the Cold War era, Pakistan became an important ally of the USA, as it became member of SEATO and CENTO. At the same time, Pakistan established close strategic ties with China which have strengthened over the years. According to scholars, Pakistan is a key nation with the geographic location and strategic significance that makes it a key factor in regional affairs.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is another major initiative of the Belt and Road (BRI)

which has further cemented Pakistan's strategic ties with China. But with the rising China–USA competition and the growing U.S.–India cooperation, Pakistan's foreign policy has come up with new challenges. The current state of thought indicates that Pakistan needs to maintain its equilibrium with great powers without compromising on its national and regional interests.

Research Gap

There is a vast body of work on U.S.-China relations, U.S.-India cooperation, and China-India rivalry, but few studies of the bilateral relationships have looked at them in a broad historical context from 1947 to 2024. Furthermore, there has been a lack of focus on the collective impact of the evolution of this 'strategic triangle' on the regional order of South Asia and the strategic environment of Pakistan. This study fills this void by examining the political, economic and strategic dynamics between the United States, China and India in the past and in comparison.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study uses qualitative historical analytical research approach to analyse the development of the relations between the United States, China and India in the period of 1947-2024. Considering the nature of the study, the qualitative approach is more appropriate as it involves in-depth exploration of intricate political, strategic and historical processes, which cannot be captured in a quantitative study. Historical analysis allows patterns, continuities and transformations in the foreign policies of the three states to be discerned, in various international settings.

Research Approach

This study takes an interpretivist method to investigate the dynamics between the United States and China with India in the background, in order to understand how historical events, strategic perceptions and geopolitical developments have influenced the dynamics between the United States, China, and India. The study aims to explore the development of trilateral relations through a study of diplomatic initiatives, policy changes, security arrangements and economic cooperation.

Data Sources

This study is based on secondary data sources only. They are scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government documents, official policy documents, strategic reports, think tank documents, and archival documents. The sources used to find the literature were the academic databases of JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories. Official documents from the U.S. Department of State, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs have also been used to augment the analysis results as they have been deemed reliable.

Data Collection Procedure

The paper analysed scholarly and policy documents using a systematic approach to cover U.S. – China relations, U.S. – India relations, China – India relations, Indo-Pacific security, regional order, and South Asian geopolitics. Sources were chosen for their relevance, credibility, scholarly impact and contribution to the research goals. Significant attention was paid to literature related to key historical events like the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Sino-Soviet split, U.S.-China rapprochement, economic liberalization of India, U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2005, and recent developments in the Indo-Pacific.

Analytical Framework

The study applies the main analytical framework of Realism and Balance-of-Power Theory. Realism offers explanations into state behavior in the context of international anarchy, and balance-of-power theory offers explanations on alliance formation and strategic balancing within the context of major powers. These theories help to explain the importance of altering relationships of power to changes in strategic decisions and foreign policy action.

Data Analysis Techniques

Three complementary analytical techniques were employed:

Historical Process Tracing: This technique was employed to uncover causal linkages between key geopolitical events and their implications for policy.

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Comparative Historical Analysis: The foreign policy trends and developments of the United States, China and India were analysed across different time periods, similarities/differences and patterns of strategic behaviour were identified.

Comparative Thematic Analysis: Recurring themes identified and analysed, including: strategic rivalry, formation of alliances, economic interdependence, regional security, balance of power politics.

Scope and Delimitations

The study will be limited to the time span of 1947–2024 and include political, economic, and strategic aspects of U.S.-China-India relationships. The implications of these relationships for Pakistan and South Asia have been taken into account in the analysis, but do not aim to offer a detailed analysis of domestic political factors within each state.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations with the study. The use of secondary data only is the first limitation as this could represent the views and interpretations of the authors who have already done the research. Second, the world of international politics is a dynamic one and events may have occurred since the research was completed. Third, there are confidentiality restrictions on some official documents and strategic assessments that are not available.

4. Analysis

Pre-1970s Relations

The early history of interactions among the U.S, China and India was formed by complex colonial histories, anti-colonial struggles for independence, and the mid-twentieth-century global political landscape. The Cold War and its ideological and strategic goals had dominated relations among these three powers before the 70s. While the US tried to contain communism and its expansion, it pursued a containment strategy towards the region, whereas China and India pursued their own postcolonial paths. It was a period when the three countries realigned themselves in their regions and often displayed none of the high levels of antagonism between the countries that would characterize later decades. But it was during this important early period that the seeds were sown for future rivalries, strategic alliances and regional rivalries that would have an enduring impact on competition and cooperation, influencing South Asian and broader international geopolitics in the second half of the twentieth century.

U.S.-China Relations: Early Hostility

The U.S. and China had a primarily unfriendly relationship in the immediate post-World War II years, restricting from the ideological conflict that followed the Communist Party's takeover of China under Mao Zedong in 1949. Then, the year before, Mao proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC), and China became a key stage for the U.S versus Soviet Cold War moves. The US, which was adamant about containing communism, viewed the Soviet Union's alliance with China as a major threat to its global power (Hussain, 2020). Adding to the tensions between Washington and Beijing was US support for Chiang Kai-shek, whose Nationalist government fled to Taiwan after being defeated in the Chinese Civil War.

Specifically, when the Cold War began, the US government initially imposed economic sanctions on China, treating Taiwan as China's legitimate representative and not recognizing the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a major player. In this respect, the US backed Japan and other countries in the region as part of its broader strategy to contain Chinese communist influence. Such geopolitical isolation of China was not specific to the US; Western countries mostly stayed away from dealing with the PRC, and China's policies were seen under the shadow of the ideological struggle between communism and capitalism (Bhasin, 2019).

US-India Relations: Early Engagements and Diverging Paths

During this period, India had a complicated relationship with the United States, as it was positioned as a nonaligned country pursuing an independent foreign policy. But once India was free in 1947 and the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had proclaimed nonalignment to deflect the Cold War, India did not stand with either the U.S. or the Soviet Union. The Nehru policy was based on the notion that no emerging independent states should be compelled to join either category held by either superpower, or that they must have the freedom to make autonomous choices in terms of economy, politics, and security (Sattar, 2015).

Although India and the United States continued their diplomatic relations, early interactions between

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the two countries remained rather limited and were dictated by conflicting priorities. The United States viewed India as a major power in the post-colonial world but often felt exasperated by its reluctance to align with either bloc during the Cold War. In contrast, India was staunchly opposed to US interventionist policies and to military alliances that appealed, opting instead for peaceful coexistence and multilateral diplomacy. These dissimilarities in ideological viewpoint created some space between them; India would take economic and military assistance from the U.S. during the preliminary years of independence (Haq, 2017).

Sino-Indian Relations: The Early Years and the 1962 Conflict

The early years were characterized by hope and cooperation in India's relations with China, especially immediately after independence. In the post-colonial world, both India and China shared common interests — namely, supporting decolonization, promoting a peaceful world order, and asserting the rights of recently self-governing states. But relations became triangular in the late 1950s and early 1960s over border conflicts. The conflict over the long-standing Sino-Indian War, or Sino-Indian War, exploded between October 20 and November 21, 1962, when China invaded militarily along the disputed border in the Himalayas.

Set against their bilateral relationship, the war became a watershed moment in Sino-Indian relations. The Chinese victory in 1962 highlighted the profound territorial and strategic divergences between the two nations, starting with the state region of Aksai Chin, right through Arunachal Pradesh, which links its northern Ladakh region to India. This conflict forced India to rethink and reformulate its security policy, leading to intimate ties with the Soviet Union that eventually culminated in the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971 (Bhasin, 2019a).

That conflict also shaped the larger influence of US-China-India relations until 1962. The US initially responded by offering assistance to India post-war, but its response remained limited. If Sino-Indian relations suffered further strains from China's rising overt hostility towards India, they also laid the groundwork for events later, especially when the United States began to recalibrate its position towards China. Despite high tensions with Beijing, by the early 1960s, the U.S. had begun to envision a strategy of using China as a counterweight to Soviet power in Asia.

The Cold War Influence on South Asia

During the early Cold War years, the U.S. and China became estranged ideologically and strategically, with Washington preoccupied with containing communism. As a non-aligned country, India tried to navigate the rocky waters between the pressures of the US and the Soviet Union on its own sovereignty. In the meantime, in the course of time, the US more and more viewed Pakistan as a friend of the region alongside other communist influenced notions due to growing Sino-Soviet threats. Pakistan, which was linked to the US through SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), emerged as a dominant strategic ally of the US within the overall Cold War design in South Asia (Sattar, 2015). By the same token, India followed an independent course in foreign relations, nonalignment, and was moving toward a special relationship with the Soviet Union. In conclusion, the highly polarized nature of the Cold War era led to starkly different foreign policy positions being pursued by both India and Pakistan in relation to major Power involvement, with US military and economic aid going towards supporting Pakistan (as part of its containment strategy) whilst India either expressed willingness to criticize or completely eschewed US policies.

U.S.-China Relations: Cold War Rivalry and Sino-Soviet Split

The early Cold War years were dominated by a stark ideological divide, with the United States and China having little in common. Years after the Chinese Civil War that culminated in the success of communism under Mao Zedong, a similar upheaval dramatically changed other Pacific nations when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949. When the communists took over China, the United States under Harry S. Truman saw a new threat to the global balance of power. The US opposed China's new communist government and, as part of its broader strategy to halt the spread of communism through multi-pronged containment, supported the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek, which fled to Taiwan after being defeated on the mainland.

As a result, China aligned itself behind the Soviet Union and joined the Communist camp, helping to reinforce the prolonged ideological war of the Cold War. Facing the perceived threat in Asia and viewing it

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as a direct threat to its influence in the Pacific, the USA began providing substantial military and economic support to anti-communist forces in Asia, including Pakistan (Chaturvedi, 2018). Consequently, US-China relations were unfriendly and politically isolated during the Cold War. Yet this began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the onset of the Sino-Soviet split, which reshaped the Cold War map.

U.S.-India Relations: Nonalignment and Strategic Divergence

Unlike the adversarial US-China rivalry, Cold War Indian foreign policy was dominated by its pursuit of nonalignment, as defined by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nonaligned India did not align with either superpower bloc—the US-led Western bloc or the Soviet Union-led Eastern bloc—during the Cold War. This stance was grounded in the idea that newly independent countries—specifically in the Global South—should not be made to pick a side in the ideological tug-of-war between the US and the Soviet Union. Instead, Nehru's vision was to encourage peace, economic expansion and multidimensional diplomacy, without being tied to the security architecture of either superpower (Sattar, 2015).

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did provide India with immense Cold War-backed support, such as defense cooperation and economic aid. This affiliation with the Soviet Union safeguarded India's independence during the Cold War, even though it strained relations with the United States. Indeed, the United States viewed India's policy of nonalignment with suspicion at the start, too, seeing it as a lack of interest in its efforts to contain Soviet influence. Though the US gave limited support both militarily and financially to India, it was marginal when compared to India's supportive relations with the Soviet Union (which included military assistance) (Haq, 2017).

The 1962 Sino-Indian War over Himalayan territorial disputes added further complications to India's relationship with the US. Post-War, India redirected its security apprehensions largely towards China and increasingly sought greater military and economic assistance from the Soviet Union. The US-India ties became more fragile during this time with regard to the US providing military assistance to Pakistan, which was a security threat to India (Bhasin, 2019).

China-India Relations: Tensions and Strategic Competition

Sino–Indian relations remained tense during the Cold War. The flashpoint of the biggest significance in their relationship was the 1962 Sino-Indian War, wherein China decisively overpowered India in a short but fierce border conflict. The war led to increased distrust between neighbouring countries over the Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh territories. After the war, there followed some cautious diplomatic exchanges between China and India, but mutual mistrust and fears of competition remained defining characteristics of their post-Cold War relationship (Bhasin, 2019).

While they were in tension, China and India both sought economic modernization and development, but through different political and economic systems. Since the 1980s and 1990s, China has been successful at transforming itself into an economic and military power, which has resulted in heightened competition between India and China across significant regions of South Asia as well as more widely around the regional ocean. India's security dilemma was further complicated by Chinese military and investment support to Pakistan. As a result, India sought to counterbalance China's expanding power by improving relations with the US, Japan, and other Western nations (Chaturvedi, 2018).

Post-Cold War Dynamics (1990–2000)

The post-Cold War era marked a qualitative change in the global geopolitical landscape and thereby changed the dynamics of the US-China-India relations. In 1991, the bipolar international system that had ruled in global politics for almost half a century broke down, and the United States became the sole remaining superpower. This transformation shook up international arrangements, strategic preferences and trends of world domination. The new world order was being created, and both China and India, as well as the U.S., began to re-examine the economic, political and security dynamics that were shifting and adjusting strategies accordingly. China extended its reform program and began asserting its presence in the international arena, while India launched economic liberalisation and expanded bilateral partnerships with numerous international actors. As flexibility became increasingly needed, Washington's desire to remain a dominant player in a rapidly changing world was met. Both China and India joined the United States in the post-Cold War world, and this new phase of U.S.-China-India relations in South Asia had far-reaching effects on regional security,

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economic development, and on diplomacy and strategic equities elsewhere: anywhere from Pakistan to Russia.

US-China Relations: The New World Order and Strategic Engagement

Following the Cold War, the United States attempted to economically engage China while avoiding overbearing its ascent as a global power. The dissolution of the Soviet Union removed the ideological adversary that defined the Cold War, and the U.S. sought to bring China into the global economy. China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 also indicated the country's growing involvement in the global economy. Relationships with China were characterized both by growing economic interdependence and strategic rivalry during this period.

During the early 1990s, when President George H. W. Bush was at the helm, US policy towards China remained engaged as China emerged as a new economic power. However, differences regarding the Chinese government's human rights practices, keeping Taiwan on the negotiating table, and questions about the capabilities of its military modernization could not overshadow the US view that China is an indispensable partner for economic cooperation and regional stability in East Asia. But China became more assertive in the region as its economic clout expanded, which made the South China Sea a greater concern in the United States. US-China relations were now facing new tests as China's military capabilities improved and its assertiveness in international organizations increased (Bhasin, 2019).

It was not until the late 1990s that signs of strain appeared in the relationship, following the first phase of US intervention in Southeast Europe (the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999), and China-US tensions through Beijing's military exercises across the Taiwan Straits during both the Taiwanese presidential election and US national elections of 1995-96. However, overall, US-China relations were stable, with both countries experiencing swift economic growth. By the late 1990s, however, American policy towards China had evolved to treat it as both an essential trading partner and a strategic competitor. The post-Cold War era of US-China relations was characterized by just such a dual approach combining engagement with elements of containment.

U.S.-India Relations: A Shift towards Strategic Partnership

Emerging from the shadow of the Cold War, US-India relations, which had been somewhat skeptical and distant for decades, began to mature slowly but surely. In the 1990s, as India moved towards engagement with the West, specifically the United States, its foreign policy underwent a transformation in line with its economic reforms agenda and a liberalizing economy. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, under then P.M Narasimha Rao, allowed for greater links with the international community and the opening of the US (Haq, 2017).

At the same time, there was a recalibration of US strategic ties with India. India's nonalignment (and its proximity to the Soviet Union during the Cold War) had kept India and the United States at arm's length from one another, but changes brought by the post-Cold War environment, due to concerns about regional security, offered new opportunities for cooperation. The 1998 nuclear tests by India altered the US-India relationship significantly and are one of the pivotal moments in US-India relations during this period. The global outcry, followed by condemnation of India, carried from different countries, including the U.S., which imposed economic sanctions under the Glenn Amendment after the nuclear tests in May 1998. But shortly after, the US-India relationship began to improve for several reasons: the US's views of India were changing, in large part due to India's economic potential, and India was seen as a major global strategic counterbalance to China's rise across Asia.

The role of India in America's strategic calculus is illustrated by another example: the 1999 Kargil conflict. While there were initial fears of nuclear escalation in South Asia, the United States kept itself at a distance (although emphasizing a political solution), and it reiterated that India is “a central player” for peace in the region. Towards the end of the decade, both countries were more oriented toward a broader partnership with an increasing US role in assisting Indian economic modernization and increased cooperation in defense (Sattar, 2015).

China-India Relations: Tensions and Strategic Rivalry

Tensions between China and India over matters of territorial dispute and strategic competition continued throughout the post-Cold War era. Their five-week border war in 1962 had left a deep scar of

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mutual resentment between the two countries and even in the 1980s and 1990s, when an atmosphere of reconciliation arose, the issue of resolving key issues, especially border issues, was never resolved. However, with the rapid economic growth and military power of China in the 90s, India has faced a strategic threat, which has now turned into a competition for regional supremacy. India was preoccupied then with its own economic growth and military modernization in the early 1990s at just about the same time that China, under Deng Xiaoping (and later Jiang Zemin) at home, was growing its economic wealth and military strength. China's consistent support in the form of military assistance to Pakistan was a problematic area for India, as it could be seen as a strategic effort by China to encircle India's regional position (Chaturvedi, 2018).

India was further suspicious of China's growing footprint in South Asia through investment as well as the "String of Pearls" strategy by China to contain or diminish Indian regional hegemony with a 'string' of commercial and military bases stretching from the Pakistani port of Gwadar east to Myanmar. Even with these backdrop tensions, diplomacy thrived in both nations. The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), was signed between India and China in 1993 to resolve its border disputes, as well as to prevent military conflict. This agreement was a diplomatic attempt to handle their differences, but strategic competition continued in the 1990s, when China began asserting itself regionally.

A Decade of Shifting Alliances

The period after the Cold War (1990–2000) saw a slow transformation of the foreign policies of the U.S, China, and India as each major power grappled with the new order. The end of the Cold War shifted an important balance in South Asia, as India emerged as a more recognized regional power and China consolidated its status as the economic giant around which all must revolve. Both countries had begun to be regarded as strategic partners, with China seen as an economic and strategic competitor, whereas India emerged as a growing regional partner for America. With Pakistan sandwiched between these opposing forces, it had to recalibrate its policies to ensure security and presence in a fast-evolving global order. The Cold War alliances of the 1990s laid the groundwork for many rivalries and alliances that would prove far more challenging for Pakistan's foreign policy, allowing it to shift its regional position in the 21st century (Ruland et al., 2016).

The 21st Century: U.S.–China–India Strategic Competition (2001–Present)

South Asia has seen a considerable change in its geopolitics during the 21st century, mainly because of the increasing strategic rivalry between the U.S., China and India. It has been an era of significant economic expansion, changing military alliances and changing power dynamics which have profoundly affected the stability and security in the region of South Asia. In past several years, China has made significant progress in becoming a major economic actor on the global stage and India is becoming one on the regional and global level, competing with one another in today's strategic race; the U.S. is playing a significant part in the shaping of the geopolitical landscape of the region. This has created opportunities and risks for Pakistan in a relationship that adjusts to the ongoing US-China-India strategic competition since 2001, but which perhaps makes Islamabad walk a tightrope regarding its position vis-à-vis an increasingly intense trilateral rivalry amongst these three global powers.

U.S.-China Relations: A Complex and Competitive Partnership

The post-9/11 period ushered in a new phase in US-China relations. The economic reforms in China under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, between the ends of the Cold War, provided a setting for China's rapid rise to become a global economic superpower. US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush responded to China economically, supporting the country's economic growth and engagement in the Asia-Pacific region while limiting overt containment policy. Becoming a trading partner was what the US considered an opportunity, but on the other hand, it viewed China's emergence as a potential future rival, especially after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (Bhasin, 2019). During the 2000s, China became central to its economic relationship with the US as a key player in global trade, manufacturing, and finance. But tensions between the two nations began to rise, especially as China strengthened its military and grew more assertive in regional affairs. Concerns about China's long-term strategic intentions toward the United States were fuelled by developments such as the South China Sea

INVERGE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
https://invergejournals.com/
ISSN (Online): 2959-4359, ISSN (Print): 3007-2018
Volume 4 Issue 3, 2025

disputes, rising Chinese influence in Africa, and a growing military budget. Throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, growing diplomatic exchanges between China and the U.S. seemed to reflect a degree of cooperation in their bilateral relationship; however, at the same time, the U.S. also emphasized that despite its engagement with China, it remains vigilant on containing China's military rise by building alliances with like-minded nations in the Asia Pacific region (Hussain, 2020).

In response to China's rising influence, the Obama administration made a definitive turn towards China with its 2011 "Pivot to Asia" policy. Through this strategy, they wanted to fortify military support with Japan, South Korea, and India as the US attempts to expand its regional influence. The military presence of the U.S in the Pacific and the strategic partnerships with regional allies were viewed by many as a direct response to China's more aggressive posture in the South China Sea and its military modernization (Chaturvedi, 2018). The trade war that started in 2018 during the Trump administration ushered in a more combative phase of US-China relations, with the competition between both powers deepening. The impact of U.S-China rivalry on Pakistan has been immense. Pakistan's economic development has been affected by both countries' positions, as China particularly has been one of Pakistan's key economic partners through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). At the same time, US–China relations have been at historic lows, and Pakistan has found itself treading a fine line between maintaining its traditional partnership with the United States and strengthening ties with China (Sattar, 2015).

U.S.-India Relations: A Growing Strategic Partnership

In the 21st century, India's foreign policy has been categorized by a dramatic shift towards a closer alliance with the U.S, predominantly as India's economic and military competencies have developed. With the end of the Cold War and India reassessing its place in a more global order, it looked at itself as a country with both economic potential and military power, zeroing in on growing its influence through actions across Asia and beyond. This foreign policy change was predominantly evident after the 1998 nuclear tests, which prompted New Delhi to pursue nuclear capability on a strategic basis and reinforce military relations with the U.S. and other Western powers. India and the U.S. made a milestone development in structuring a strategic relationship with the 2005 U.S-India Civil Nuclear Agreement. In exchange for commitments on civilian nuclear cooperation, the deal ended India's pariah status and brought the country into a new alignment, reflecting its growing role in international security and non-proliferation efforts. Over the next few years, both countries broadened their cooperation in other areas, including defense, counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and trade. This formal foundation of India-U.S defense relations has been in place since the signing of the Defense Framework Agreement in 2005 and subsequent military cooperation agreements (Chaturvedi, 2018).

The two countries have been increasingly engaging with each other as they seek collaboration to counterbalance the rising influence of China in the region. India and the U.S share a common concern about China's military rise and its greater assertiveness farther afield in the Indo-Pacific region. India's rising defense expenditure, its involvement in the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the U.S, Japan, and Australia, and India's strategic alignment with the US on decision-making with respect to the Indo-Pacific further reinforced the view that the two countries' security interests had converged closely (Bhasin, 2019). The US sees India becoming a major partner, as India has become strategically important to the US in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, creating new opportunities for closer defense and security cooperation. Thus, the strengthening of US-India ties has posed both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. Pakistan has been a longstanding ally of the U.S. on counter-terrorism issues and regional security, but its relationship with the US has become more complicated as well, increasingly strained by what some see as growing US alignment with India. Pakistan is also reevaluating its foreign policy, realigning itself with China, due to its relations with the United States being affected by ties with India (Haq, 2017).

China-India Relations: Strategic Competition and Rivalry

In the 21st century, China-India relations have been characterized by strategic competition, economic collaboration, and an unresolved border dispute. Despite mutual interests in regional stability, conflict over territorial claims and competing ambitions in the Indo-Pacific have repeatedly put China and India on opposing sides. China has not given up its rights to the Aksai Chin area which is under its occupation and New Delhi has a claim to the state of Arunachal Pradesh, where both sides have had tense military standoffs

INVERGE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
https://invergejournals.com/
ISSN (Online): 2959-4359, ISSN (Print): 3007-2018
Volume 4 Issue 3, 2025

and diplomatic tensions. China's growing presence in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, has raised concerns about its direct competition with India in the region. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connecting the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan is also a matter of controversy in India, as Beijing's insertion in Pakistan has become a strategic concern for New Delhi.

To counterbalance China, India has been trying to enhance its relations with the United States, Australia and Japan, along with enhancing its military force and speeding up its economic development to become a regional player. China has become relatively strong economically in the past couple of decades and has more leverage than before in the international arena, especially against India. In the region, it has posed a threat to the influence of India by gaining economic strength and military force. The BRI is expected to connect China with more infrastructure and connectivity in Asia, which is a concern for India and the U.S. with their respective geopolitical ambitions as well (Chaturvedi, 2018).

5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm this and suggest that the evolution of U.S.-China-India relations should be viewed as a process of change influenced by power distributions and shifts in strategic perceptions, as well as by changing geopolitical realities. The behaviour of the three states is consistent with the fundamental principles of realism and balance-of-power theory in various historical eras, including the quest for security, influence and strategic advantage.

One of the important developments is the shift from ideological confrontation in the Cold War era to economic engagement in the post-Cold War era to strategic competition in the twenty-first century between the United States and China. But with the rise of economic interdependence, there were benefits to cooperating, but the technological rivalries, military modernization and concerns about regional influence have sparked more competition between the two powers. It is a contributor to realist arguments that economic cooperation will not necessarily deter strategic competition, when states feel that the balance of power is shifting.

The results also show that U.S.-India relations have undergone a significant shift. India's approach to foreign policy has changed from a policy of nonalignment to 'strategic partnership' with the United States. India has been promoting the development of strategic autonomy but increasing worries about China's dominance in the region have led to a strengthening of ties with Washington in defense, technology and naval security. The rising strategic convergence between the two countries is a balancing act to China's emergence in Asia.

China-India relations continue to be one of economic engagement and strategic competition. Although bilateral trade and diplomatic relations have been expanding, the unresolved border issues and competing regional aspirations remain a source of tension. Despite the continued existence of military standoffs and tensions, economic interdependence seems to have not solved the underlying geopolitical conflicts. The results thus corroborate arguments that security is an important issue in the process of relations between states, even in a globalised world.

The study also shows how the Indo-Pacific is now the key theatre of conflict between the three powers. Naval developments, the creation of new maritime security arrangements, and the increasing focus on maritime security suggest that control of strategic sea lanes and influence in the region have become more significant. The Indo Pacific initiative is thus now a focal point of the current geopolitics.

The findings imply opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. CPEC offers opportunities for infrastructure development and regional connectivity for the expansion of economic engagements in the region by China. But the rise of a China-U.S. rivalry and the increased cooperation between the U.S. and India pose strategic challenges that must be skilfully managed diplomatically. Balanced foreign policy becomes crucial with Pakistan's strategic partnerships and geographical location in the evolving regional dynamics.

In general, the concluding remarks stress the significance of the U.S.-China-India strategic triangle in today's geopolitics of Asia. How these powers' view competition, cooperate with each other and deal with new security and economic issues will likely shape the future regional order. Competition is likely to continue, but this will not lead to a lasting escalation of conflict in the region if diplomacy and institutional cooperation can be kept going.

6. Conclusion

U.S.-Sino-India relations span decades of history and reveal a process of evolution of interests and ideologies between the two nations in a region that has influenced the regional and global order in that period. From little contact and differing ideologies to a complicated game of competition, cooperation and balancing in global geopolitics, this triangle of the early Cold War to the present-day Indo-Pacific has come a long way. The cycles of this relationship reflect the three principal cycles of international systemic transition: decolonization, bipolar rivalry, multipolarity and globalization.

The United States and China had gone through phases of conflict and reconciliation; India had been in a phase of nonalignment and autonomy in its policy. The war between China and India in 1962 and the lingering border conflicts instilled long-term mistrust between these two countries, having a profound impact on South Asian security dynamics. Two other developments in the region also changed the alignment and the foreign policy thrust of India, namely the Sino-Soviet split and the U.S.-China rapprochement.

While multipolarity, economic interdependence and globalization promoted diplomacy between the three powers in the post-Cold War and 21st century periods, their relations have become increasingly characterized by strategic rivalry. Interstate relations in Asia have reshuffled under the impact of an improving international environment for China vis-à-vis its neighbours, India as a regional and global actor with growing but still developing capabilities, and America, which has reinvigorated its Indo-Pacific strategy. Increased military and technological cooperation, especially in defense and maritime matters, is a symptom of the U.S. and India becoming more aligned in regions where China is perceived as drawing geopolitical influence. At the same time, lingering border disputes, rivalry for regional predominance and polarized geopolitical mindsets have made China-India relations extraordinarily demanding.

In this study, the findings advance the argument that diplomatic engagement and sustained dialogue will play an important role in future U.S.-Sino-India relations and continue to shape pivotal aspects of the Asian regional order as well as the continent's security architecture more broadly. Although rivalry between these powers is expected to heighten, diplomatic activity, economic collaboration and strategic talks will be necessary to achieve a degree of stability in building prosperity within individual nations and preventing significant conflict. The fate of Asia's geopolitical future will be increasingly determined by how these rivalries, alliances and national interests are managed in this new multipolar world among the three states.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants and the respective universities for their support and cooperation in conducting this study.

Contribution of Authors

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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