

# Contemporary India-US-China relations: Mapping the New Emerging World Order

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## Abstract

In contemporary international relations scholarship, the strategic triangle formed by India-US-China has led to a resurgent debate to understand the ramifications of their interaction for the emergence of a new world order. The underlying nature of the trilateral relationship gives inevitable rise to unease, doubt, and hesitancy with a mixed variance of confrontation and cooperation. In recent years with the economic and technological boom of China and India along with their border conflict, has alarmed the strategists and foreign policy experts about the possible escalation of the conflict and the challenge it poses to the so called peaceful post-cold war world order created by the U.S. The visit of US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to India on June 13, 2023, followed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken visit to China on June 18, 2023 and the Prime Minister Modi's State visit to USA from June 21-24, 2023 have rekindled the discussion on the narratives of the emerging world order. Hence, the paper is an attempt to understand the rise of a new emerging world order with the relative ascendancy of China-India, and the decline of USA on the one side in addition to the confrontational attitude of India-China and USA-China on the other.

**Keywords:** civilizational exceptionalism; emerging world order; India-US-China relations; status dilemma; strategic triangle.

## Introduction

The variable factors of various (triangular) relationships such as geopolitical interests, alliances and partnerships, security concerns, economic interdependence, etc. are constantly changing, making international politics more complex than ever. However, the current global order is for the most part centered on the ongoing exchanges between the three big players of the international system: the U.S., China, and India and their strategic partners. The strategic contacts between these three nations have drawn extensive examination for their role in shaping or creating a new framework for the world order from interested observers since a new competitive-conflictual environment between them has replaced the Cold War's combative climate. It would be a major event in the coming decades when these three players will engage vigorously, and chances of a new world order getting established from the interaction in the new strategic triangle(s) seem very high. Remember the coming age; new world order would be significantly different and challenging than the erstwhile world order of western societies, particularly the USA. China, India, and the rest of the actors from other triangles would actively participate, which was a missing factor up to the end of the unipolar order and hence reshaped the contemporary west-dominated world order. While the west, specifically the USA, was the pivot and the provider of the erstwhile world order in a unipolar international structure, the new world order would be facilitated within a multipolar world with the likely continued disruption in the US-China and India-China relations. China's continued rise in capabilities coupled with asymmetrical Indian ascendance on the world stage and how Washington charts its course with a relatively declining power status, would be the driving factors of the new emerging world order.

While the Narendra Modi government's objective seems to be to enhance India's reputation as a major global player and a nation ready to assist in establishing a new world system, India, as a fast-growing economy, has both the will and the potential to be a game-changer player. At the same time, this image of India is buttressed by Washington for its security interests. The U.S. secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, reportedly said, "India not only represents one of the most significant countries by any measurement in the world today but will help shape a new world order emerging in this young century"(Gary2014). The United States anticipates India to play the role of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond as its power increases. It is well known now and widely documented that the engagement policy has miserably failed to bring China under the liberal democratic banner. As the most current U.S. National Security Strategy openly acknowledges, U.S. engagement with China and its membership in the international system depended on making China a benevolent player. If this naive notion was indeed held, it has been disproved during the past ten years. The debate on the US-China relationship becomes more complex at this point. Is the sole purpose of competition to protect U.S. national interests and hold onto advantages that are perceived to be vanishing? Or is the escalating rivalry based on a new world order? The answer is somewhere in the middle. The ostensible, now fading world order was created by the U.S. following the end of the cold war with no state to challenge its might to fundamentally protect its national interests as well as of its allies. Foreign policymakers, from time to time, believed that the PRC could be infinitely contained with the mixed policies of containment and engagement.

Beijing cleverly adhered to Xiaoping's prescription to maintain a low image and avoid spreading its wings. But what transpired was that China needed time to become the (nuclear) Godzilla of the international system while feeding on the same system it now wants to replace, if not destroy, immediately. This time the U.S. is trying to bring India to chain the mighty Frankenstein creature. Despite India having reservations about China's Machiavellian strategies and unjust policies, it should try to become friendly with the creature, while not breaking ties with its creator which now has become its (unsuccessful) hunter. Maintaining a safe distance from both seems the real political option. Again the larger intriguing question remains what the future world order will look like, how and why the situation has become turbulent with challenges to the world order coming explicitly from China and the hedging or saying no to the overt side taken by the New Delhi regime. To understand the prospects for the future global order analyzing the trajectory of the present international system requires nuanced analysis. The paper traces the origin of the erstwhile world order and the role US played in creating and sustaining such a world order. It also analyses the important role China has played in the reordering of the new world order through understanding the pushes and pulls of the interaction among this new strategic triangle. A critical assessment of various challenges China poses for both India and US and vice versa have been dealt with in the same section. Using the logic of power politics the antagonistic behaviour of China and US towards each other is analyzed. Civilizational exceptionalism, a core belief and status dilemma, a *raison d'état* of all the three states makes the case for studying the world order both present and future, an interesting and novel enterprise.

### **Who's World Order: Foundations of the Liberal Rule-based World Order?**

The term liberal rule-based world order (LRBWO), frequently linked with the United States, and rightly so, describes a cluster of values, norms, and institutions that have influenced global order since the end of World War II during America's first unipolar moment<sup>1</sup>. It's crucial to remember that a large coalition of nations with similar ideals and objectives have adopted LRBWO, influenced by the then rise of the U.S., not just the United States per se. However, notably in the years following World War II, the United States has taken the lead in establishing and maintaining this order mostly for keeping its hegemonic status intact. There have been some visible and common characteristics of such a system, like democratic governance, international institutions, free trade, and economic liberalization, alliances and security cooperation, human rights and humanitarian intervention, rule of law and international law, and so on. In this context, democracy does not refer to a liberal domestic political system but rather to a multi-polar system of formal and informal international checks and balances, where no state can dominate any other state and major global issues are resolved through consensus. These terms, such as democratic international systems, are frequently used to describe a multi-polar world order in which institutional and legal frameworks would restrain the United States and thus have less power to impose unilateral solutions on the other great powers (Ambrosio 2005)

As documented and well-established, despite sweeping under-the-carpet strategies of the U.S., the sole superpower after the end of the cold war has used the same LRBWO for furthering its vested interest and wreaking havoc around the globe against states for not adhering and following the dictates of the sole hegemon state. Criticism aside, even for the larger part, the U.S. could not bridge the divide between theory and praxis. The disillusionment and revolt against the ostensible benevolent order created and maintained by the U.S. in the present global power politics of the state system is the result of the slow but gradual downfall of an erstwhile global hegemon. This argument is supported by Declinists like Paul Kennedy, David Calleo, Robert Gilpin, and Samuel P. Huntington, whose claims are becoming stronger every passing day<sup>2</sup>. "The Declinists believed that the United States was experiencing a slow—termite-like—decline caused by fundamental structural weaknesses in the American economy that were gradually nibbling at its foundations"(Layne 2018).The U.S.'s waning global influence undermined the four pillars—military force, economic power, institutions, and soft power—on which the Pax Americana was built. It is becoming less and less likely that these pillars will hold up the Pax Americana in the present and future.

This line of argumentation has given ample scope to think of a "Post-American World Order" (Zakaria 2008). In general, the phrase "post-American world order" refers to a hypothetical or projected change in the global balance of power away from the United States as the leading superpower and the ensuing restructuring of the international order. It predicts a future in which the U.S. no longer has the same degree of power and influence over worldwide developments as it once had. However, it does not suggest that American management or leadership has completely vanished but has diminished relative to earlier times. It indicates a more multi-polar system with a larger division of power among several players, such as emerging powers, regional blocks, and international organizations. The idea of a post-American international order is still hypothetical, and different geopolitical, economic, and social elements will affect the globe's future. Such a shift's specific characteristics and ramifications are unclear and might take multiple forms depending on future developments.

The Pax Americana is experiencing strain for various domestic and external reasons such as internally, income inequality, stagnant real income, the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, and slow productivity growth has hollowed out the middle class"<sup>3</sup>. "Externally, the Pax Americana is imperiled by the shifting of the world's economic—and geopolitical—centers of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia, which presages the end of the West's five centuries of global dominance" (Layne 2018). This move is true "all about the rise of Asia, and most importantly, China,"<sup>4</sup>according to Martin Wolf, the Financial Times' senior economic analyst. The great, impersonal forces of history—the relative loss of American dominance and the rising China—rather than Donald Trump's victory, which was more of a symptom rather than the cause to be exact, explain why the Pax Americana's days are expiring. For good measure, these large, impersonal forces of history have received a strong push forward from both the paralyzing effects of the polarization of the U.S. political system and America's policies, including the mismanagement of its economy that caused the Great Recession in 2008 and the "forever wars" in which it has become entangled in the Middle East and Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>.

Then for E. H. Carr, the incumbent hegemon has a conscious choice to make when challenged by a rising power. It may stand firm and work to maintain the current order—and its privileged place within it—or it can give in to the requests for modification made by the burgeoning competitor. It risks going to war with the unsatisfied challenger if it takes the former course of action. If it chooses the latter, it will have to accept that its hegemonic position is ending and declining (Carr 2016). It may not be explicitly clear which choice the incumbent hegemon has made in the current world scenario but from the behavioral tendencies and policy framework of it; we can gauge that it has no room for giving a privileged position to other powerful challenger states, like Russia, China or to some extent to India also. Hence the paper argues that the result of the Sino-American competition and the Indian state's tilt or open support to one state at the expense of another will decide the future of the Pax Americana and the nature of the emerging global order.

### **What China Has in Store for the Emerging World Order**

As China is modernizing in all fields, it cannot but think of dominating other states both in its immediate periphery and around the globe, as any additional rising great power would behave on the world stage when it surpasses the capabilities of other states in relative terms. China cannot be held hostage to such a line of thinking, which presupposes it to act morally in a world of anarchical selfish states with no overarching constraints to keep them in check and willfully give away its pie of cake to others. It's wishful thinking that the party in Beijing would act against its national interests when the logic of maximizing power can give it a primal role in the community of states. After all, what China is doing is nothing new for the ones who have a vivid understanding of the international history of states. When they are at the zenith of their power, nations have dominated other small countries, whether imperialist Japan, Colonial Britain or USA, Czarist Russia, etc., all have been power maximizers in the past at the expense of their colonies. For its part, even the USA went on a rampage when it had no other competitor on the world stage and razed to ground anyone going against the dictates of the omnipotent superpower. China, or for that matter any state which behaves irresponsibly and acts aggressively when it has all the power to challenge any State, takes its history lessons from the incumbent hegemon USA, which has employed the tactics of both military warfare and soft power very well to crush and persuade the recalcitrant states respectively. This carrot and sticks approach has been at the forefront of maintaining a system that unjustly justifies the *carte blanche* of the U.S. while at the same time making way clear for the smooth functioning of the LRBWO.

However, China has, in the recent decade under the authoritarian leadership of Xi Jinping, challenged the U.S., its allies, and the LRBWO, which has been a hallmark of the dominance of the unipolar power structure. China now threatens the Pax Americana's foundational elements: military, economy, institutions, and ideas. Christopher Layne asks a fundamental and pertinent question: "If China surpasses, equals, or even approximates the United States in these dimensions of power, can the Pax Americana endure? And if it cannot, what will replace it" (Layne 2018)? While the answer to the first question has been analyzed in the narrative of the 'post-American world order',

and the available data indicate that China has been competing with the U.S. in key critical technologies, it's un-denying to say that it has already surpassed the U.S. in some important sectors. "Beijing built the world's largest mine arsenal, the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile, and the world's largest submarine fleet—all to undermine U.S. military power" (Doshi 2021).

The second question recently has been a matter of great debate among policy pundits, foreign policy experts, academicians, and think tanks around the globe with the rising clout of China and its aggressive nature in managing its relationship with other states, mostly U.S. strategic partners and allies. While the key difference lies in what Beijing has in store for the world, the overarching spectrum of scholars agrees that the U.S. has developed deep fractures within the body politic, which will eventually pay the way for its decline and a replacement of its nurtured order by something fundamentally different. However, the "Primacists" still are hopeful and contend that there has been much overstatement of China's ascent and, by extension, America's fall. Primacists hold that the international order is still unipolar and that U.S. strength will keep it that way for a long time. Scholars like Robert Kagan, Niall Ferguson, Charles A. Kupchan, and Walter Russel Mead belong to this group.

While there is an urgent need to reform the current world order -a fossilized version of the post-1945 international order- to reflect the changes that have taken place in the global environment and include the legitimate concerns of various rising powers and still marginalized under-developing and least-developed states, the reform in the world order is not necessary because China, India or Russia demand it, it's the need of the hour to keep the entire state system running as a functional unit. The U.S. has been explicitly against any reformation in the LRBWO as it preserves its privileges. It gives it a mammoth share in the decision-making in world institutions and major events. However, any adjustments would cause the international order to shift, which would be detrimental to the supremacy of the West, particularly the U.S. Regardless of American desires, the international order will undoubtedly undergo significant changes in the next decades, whether or not institutional reform materializes. These pulls and pressures make the U.S. skeptical about allowing any change in the world order and the nightmares that the U.S. body politic has with its formal replacement as a dominant power by China or a coalition of states led by China, Russia, or India. There are demonstrable indicators that China is starting to catch up to the U.S. regarding regional military might in East Asia, even though it can now not pose a worldwide challenge to the U.S. The RAND Corporation reference to this in a recent report on the Sino-American military balance shows the "receding frontier of U.S. military dominance"(Heginbotham et al.2015)in East Asia.

China has shown a growing enthusiasm to challenge both the U.S. and India since Donald Trump assumed the charge of the Presidential office and Narendra Modi took the reins of Indian democracy. This new cold war (Shea2019)between the U.S. and China on the one hand and China and India on the other, has been exacerbated by the covid-19 induced disruptions, and as Henry Kissinger argued that the covid-19 threatens to "set the world on fire" and it might eventually overthrow the current world order(Kissinger 2020). The endgame of the erstwhile world order started with "the tension between the Western and non-western world"(Bradford 2022).

The visible contradictions and tensions between the two dichotomous sides, opposing force fields, characterize the new global order and reverberate across international bodies, multilateral forums, issues, and challenges.

As Rush Doshi, in his recent book "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order," contends that China has attempted to oust the United States from regional and global order through three successive "strategies of displacement" undertaken at the military, political, and economic levels (Rush Doshi 2021). The first of these strategies intended to weaken American influence regionally, the second sought to strengthen Chinese power regionally, and the third—a strategy of expansion—now tries to do both locally and internationally. Following Brexit (2016), the election of Trump (2017) and the Capitol Hill protests (2021), and the poor response of the U.S. towards Covid (2020), the Communist Party of China concluded that the United States was losing ground internationally while also acknowledging the bilateral threat posed by China. As Xi put it, Beijing believed that by 2049, "great changes unseen in a century" and "time and momentum are on our side"<sup>6</sup> would make it possible to usurp the United States as the world's most powerful nation. The ensuing decade was particularly important in achieving this goal and developing campaigns to dethrone the United States as an international leader. So in the words of Evan Osnos, China "is preparing to shape the twenty-first century, much as the U.S. shaped the twentieth" (Osnos 2020). This competition is not restricted to the regional order alone but to the wholesale change of the global order in favor of Beijing.

While we have a clear picture that the U.S. will face tremendous challenges from China in the near future, we have a blurred idea of the new world order shaped by the new Challenger state. And predicting the future is always a godly endeavor to work through. Although from the structure of the three states' international and domestic governing systems, we can decipher the broad realistic options available for reordering the current world order through the interaction of the strategic triangle. Beijing lately constitutes over 50 percent of all military expenditures in Asia and over fifty percent of the continent's GDP, which is tipping the equilibrium of the continent towards a Chinese sphere of gravity.

"A fully realized Chinese order might eventually involve the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan and Korea, the end of American regional alliances, the effective removal of the U.S. Navy from the Western Pacific, deference from China's regional neighbors, unification with Taiwan, and the resolution of territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas," argues R. Doshi.

Chinese order is anticipated to be more repressive than the current order, cooperative in ways that principally favor linked influential people even at the cost of the general population, and thought of as legit largely to those few who it specifically benefits. Given authoritarian forces growing more powerful throughout the region, China would implement this order in ways that undermine liberal ideals. The establishment of the order outside the borders frequently reflects the maintenance of order at home, and China's establishment of the order would be markedly repressive in comparison to the established order of the U.S. "Chinese order would be anchored in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its Community of Common Destiny,

with the former in particular creating networks of coercive capability, consensual inducement, and legitimacy"(Peng 2020). To reshape the regional order by giving a sense to the world that it can actively engage in building a world order as well, China vigorously worked successfully by establishing the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and mainstreamed the once-unknown and obscure Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). China's AIIB plan is significant as it "represents a double-barreled challenge simultaneously to U.S. leadership of the global economy and the Pax Americana's institutional (and ideational) foundations"(Layne 2018). Other institutions that have the potential significance to draw attention toward the Chinese-led international order include the Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. "The staying power and impact of these institutions are uncertain, but at the very least, they are important symbolically"(Layne 2018). They highlight the demise of the American-designed post-World War II world order as well as the growing prominence of emerging powers like Beijing and New Delhi as well as the revival of old ones like Moscow, all of which call for acknowledgment of their position and reputation as well as a greater concomitant voice in the decision-making process of the international structure.

By acting like a global statesman Xi recently floated a potential peace plan to end the war in Ukraine while at the same time giving unprecedented significance to its bilateral relationship with Russia. Xi also brokered a peace deal between two eternal foes, Saudi Arabia and Iran. In March 2023, he also met with President Emmanuel Macron of France in China only, and "Macron's criticism against the extra-territoriality of the U.S. dollar has also helped China stir up the debate on American economic hegemony"(Mankikar & Shekhawat 2023). These well-thought-out strategies "is part of China's efforts to position itself as a more qualified leader of an alternative international order and attack U.S. hegemony, both politically and financially"(Mankikar & Shekhawat 2023). Beijing also questioned the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan. It blamed it for imposing harsh sanctions on the already war-torn state. It considers SWIFT as an alternative framework to the payment system of Russia, which could de-dollarize the world economy and provide a greater role of its Yuan in International trade settlement and currency reserves.

"This Chinese attempt at global repositioning is rooted in its desire to present itself as a credible alternative to the United States of America. Whereas the Covid years saw China preoccupied with its domestic concerns, the post-Covid phase would necessarily demand that Beijing redress the situation by turning outwards"(Pant 2023).

Harsh Pant argues that all of this is happening at a momentous historical period when there is a vacuum in global leadership and order.

"It also realizes that if it doesn't move fast, nations like India and leaders like Narendra Modi are also emerging as rallying points. India's outreach to the developing world during Covid and its attempts to keep the 'Global South' at the core of its G20 presidency has challenged China's self-perceived image as the leader of developing nations"(Pant 2023).



True to certain levels, "rather than advance a positive program of its own, Beijing has been content to offer a critique of Western-style capitalism, liberal democracy, and so-called universal values while presenting itself as a pragmatic, non-judgmental partner interested only in win-win cooperation" (Friedberg 2018). China will keep pushing towards a stronger role in organizations like the IMF and World Bank on behalf of itself and the developing world (until new institutions that are "made in China" replace them). Beijing will present its actions as the representative of the developing world, a position to which it is ideally well qualified. Like the rest of the third-world countries, the PRC has fallen prey to Western Great Power strategies of imperialism and colonialism. As a result, Beijing has an adequate right to leadership in creating a fresh global framework that does not represent the ideals of the developed world but rather resonates with the developing world (Jacques 2009).

On the other hand, India has deep differences with China over the boundary question; their understanding of and actions towards international law and the sanctity of the treaties, whether colonial or post-colonial, have given the current relationship an irreconcilable nature. New Delhi has taken a bold step of restricting its economic interaction with Beijing after the 2020 standoff and the violation of boundary agreements. Added to this internal factor, the U.S. decoupling links with China made India take "a host of offensive measures" (Mishra 2020) against the economic statecraft of Beijing. Indian state shedding away the old principles governing its foreign policy imperatives has overcome what one analyst called "the hesitations of history" and consequently "embracing "the U.S. to minimize the pressure from China."<sup>7</sup> The old-age non-alignment stance of New Delhi has given way to its updated version of strategic autonomy, which in turn got replaced by the pragmatic policies of "multi-alignment" and "issue-based alignment".<sup>8</sup> Flexibility has become the hallmark trait of Indian foreign policy.

India has actively supported the U.S. since 2015 to make the South China Sea a free space according to the laws of the sea and freedom of navigation. India and the U.S. finished finalizing three key agreements: LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) in 2016, COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) in 2018, and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) in 2020, which "enable greater access to U.S. logistical facilities, high-tech communications infrastructure, and geospatial data" (Mukherjee 2020). Additionally, India has shown that the nation is engaged with American policy by supporting the Quad's resurrection in 2017 and Joe Biden's initiatives to strengthen the organization's regional cooperation to "reconfigure the Indo-Pacific balance of power" (Mohan 2021).

While the national interests have been well served and the aggressive Chinese policies have been restricted by the joint working mechanism of the two countries, the China factor alone cannot keep the two countries on a cooperative peddle as some serious problems prevail which hamper their smooth and progressive working of the relationship. India is developing and formalizing organizations like the BRICS and SCO grouping, which brings together New Delhi and other developing nations "on the lack of representation and voice in the embedded power structures within the Western hemisphere" (Schmidt 2014).

India believes that the world (order) should be multi-polar, with the voices of developing countries given due importance at all international platforms. It takes an unambiguous position against monopoly and abuse of power in all its aspects. The country stands against any unilateralism by any player through space and time. These policies contradict the U.S. worldview and its image as a benevolent omnipresent global hegemon. New Delhi also took a different, to some levels, contradictory assessment of the war in Ukraine. It didn't join hands with Washington in declaring Russia as an aggressor or cutting ties with Moscow and abstained from UNSC resolutions declaring Russia as an aggressor. Instead, India has been importing the low-cost oil facilitated by Russia since the invasion started in Feb 2022 and has also continuously provided New Delhi with military equipment, all against the wishes of the U.S. Hence, one state (first) cannot act against the other (second) state, completely ignoring the other (third) state, and its impact (positive or negative) on the relationship of the trio. Therefore, 'as long as India–China–America is constrained by the strategic triangular relationship, it remains to be seen what impact it will have on the evolving world order'(Kupchan 2012).

### **Tragedy of Great power politics and the world order**

Western scholarship in international relations remains consensual that the PRC is an authoritarian revisionist state which is hell-bent on overthrowing the present rule-based liberal international world order of the west.<sup>9</sup> While China can certainly be blamed for the crisis in international stability, other states, particularly the USA, cannot be pardoned for its nefarious designs throughout the globe and for provoking China at a time when it can challenge the U.S. at every step. While Washington expects Beijing and Delhi to follow the democratic liberal system after the Cold War, it has now "abandoned or suspended some of the same rules that it used to advocate, such as those of the Paris agreement on climate change and the Trans-Pacific Partnership" (Jisi et al. 2018). Foreign policy decision-makers in China find it increasingly difficult to understand the rules Americans aim to uphold for themselves and others, the type of global order they expect to preserve, and the U.S.'s stance on significant international problems. The main issue is that China entered the post-1945 and then the post-1991 order "not as a client or junior partner but as an independent state" (Singh 2020). This fundamental reality is what the U.S. establishment refuses to acknowledge. China's ascent was hastened by the liberal order, which contributed to the system's transition from unipolar to multipolar. The Western elites who created the liberal international order and benefited greatly from it are horrified by its impending collapse. It is not so much about preserving the world order and practicing morality in international relations by the U.S. as it is about losing the hold over the world leadership, status, resources, and power.

As Mearsheimer in 'China's Un-peaceful Rise' makes a nuanced analysis of the behavior of rising China and its emerging rivalry with the USA, he argues that "China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the U.S. dominates the western hemisphere" (Mearsheimer 2006). PRC will strive to widen the power disparity with its competitors, particularly Russia, Japan, and India. No nation will be able to threaten it because China will make sure it is extremely powerful.

Although there is always a possibility, it is improbable that China will strive for military dominance to launch an offensive and overthrow other Asian countries. Similar to how the U.S. makes it apparent to other nations that it is in charge, it is more likely that China will attempt to impose its rules of conduct on its neighbors. China can only retake Taiwan by establishing itself as a regional hegemon. A stronger China will not permit American military troops to operate in its territorial sphere of influence. "American policymakers, after all, become apoplectic when other great powers send military forces into the western hemisphere" (Mearsheimer 2006). After all, outside troops are always perceived as a possible danger to American security. China applies the same reasoning in managing its relations with the U.S. and its neighboring states. It cannot feel safe with the forces encircling it from all sides; no state does. Of course, a hyper-nationalist China is also concerned about survival and power, which is why it is likely to imitate the U.S. and try to dominate the region. Since the U.S. does not tolerate or enjoy other competitors, one may anticipate that it will go to considerable efforts to restrain China and eventually render it incapable of governing the rest of Asia. In effect, America is expected to treat China similarly to how it treated the USSR during the Cold War. The logical sequence of events shows that the PRC would only rest once the American forces were pushed back out of Asia. We should not fall into the trap of thinking that the Chinese will behave differently than the U.S. This tragedy of great power politics throws the world order into confrontations and chaos.

### **The common (ironical) dilemma of Exceptionalism and Status**

The current world order is laden with and up for crisis and instability arising from the confrontational trilateral relationship. The idea of civilizational exceptionalism and status dilemma pervade the strategic triangle and are important factors in shaping the attitude of the three players in carving both the present and future world order. All three states see themselves in terms of distinct civilizational differences, a precursor to Universalist ethics, and holding a central position among the galaxy of nation-states. This notion is connected with a civilization state loosely defined as "rooting politics in general on civilizational essences" (Jal 2022). Run by occult ideologies, "narcissism, psychotic egotism, and the idea of chosen people from the three angles"(Jal 2022) of Civilization states. The neo-imperialist notion is that the clash of civilizations has links to civilization states. In Taiwan, where Beijing is now executing its interpretation of the civilization state after performing it in Tibet and Hong Kong, Putin discovered that the true nature of the civilization state in Ukraine, where the sovereignty and self-determination of Ukraine are turned down in favor of the bogus notion of something termed as deeper fraternal unity between Russians and Ukrainians, by creating an authoritarian state in the name of culture, this state evokes what the French scholar Bernard-Henri Levi dubbed 'Eurasian morbidity'. In India, the unequal treatment and suppression of minorities along the civilizational lines can be equated with the discrimination of the black and indigenous populations in America and Western Europe. Thereby a civilization state's innate infamous tendencies are anti-modern and anti-humanist.

The triad states of the strategic triangle imagine themselves as exceptional in a civilizational sense; henceforth, it would not be incorrect to call it a 'civilizational triangle' as well, on certain common identifiable grounds as below the paper will discuss the exchange of exceptionalism of the U.S., China, and India. Therefore both the present world order and the new world order would be hostage to such a (toxic) line of thinking where the 'far right neo-imperial clash of civilizations perspective' shapes the rulers' mindset and the corresponding strategic policies of the triangle.

The U.S. leadership believes there is a generalized sense of unease and worry about the upkeep of a global system that supports an American identity built around the idea of American greatness. These presumptions are based on and support U.S. assertions of world dominance. China is a fundamental fountainhead of both physical and "ontological insecurity" (Chacko 2014) since it is a disruptive force that casts doubt on U.S. beliefs about the universality of its institutions and ideals. A widely expressed notion is that the United States intends to capitalize on India as a counterbalance (Kaplan 2009). However, American policymakers need to explain India's importance in terms of economic or defensive objectives. Official statistics from the U.S. government underline how different India is from China due to its democratic values, "strong relationships among our people, and cultural reach" (Daggett 2010). India's rise has yet to lead to the exaggerated global rhetoric that has followed China's ascent. This is true even though the arguments used to support the idea that China's ascent threatens the international system also hold for India. It is claimed that China poses a danger since it is motivated by nationalist sentiment, sees itself as the center of world culture, longs to redeem the mistreatment of the past, and aspires to usurp American dominance as the most powerful nation in Asia by carrying out upgrading its military and the proliferation of its naval presence. (Bernstein & Munro 1997).

On the other side, the discussion of India's growth continues to weaken India's postcolonial identity, even when U.S. moves have the impact of validating India's view of itself as a significant accountable state. The postcolonial identity is based on ideas of India's civilizational uniqueness, which distinguishes India from the west and places a premium on strategic independence, self-reliance, and a unique normative view of the international system. India's ascendancy as a significant political and economic force has led to a change in its approach to international affairs from an ethical "idealism" to an interest-based "realism" in reaction to the threat posed by the Chinese rise to a US-dominated global order and its presumption of the versatility of U.S. beliefs and systems (Mohan 2003) founded on the notion of American uniqueness. Even though relations between India and the U.S. have improved, these connections are nevertheless impeded by their divergent worldviews and self-perceptions. However, analyzing whether the shift in Indian foreign policy is justified, is outside the purview of this essay, and has occurred from having an idealistic moral vision of the world order to an interest-based realistic vision. The fact that both India and the U.S. have identities supported by the notion that they have extraordinary traits because of their history and character has long been a major area of friction in bilateral relations. As Priya Chacko defines American and Indian exceptionalism as the idea that American institutions, alongside its values, are global and, therefore, the USA ought to assume worldwide leadership;

India's civilizational uniqueness promotes the notion that the nation is credited a "non-coercive, prudent, exemplar-style approach to ethical leadership" (Chacko 2014) followed by a just road to progress. Although the concurrent development of exceptionalist character reinforced the special bond between the U.S. and the U.K., the ongoing conflict between U.S. and Indian exceptionalism makes it unlikely that the declining U.S. will be successful in forging an immediate fresh, unique partnership with India, at least given the circumstances. For Narlikar, India's long lasted advocacy of anti-hegemonic alliances and commitment to hard-line bargaining tactics in international forums is mainly attributable to a political climate that the country developed as a result of its imperialist encounters, its postcolonial skepticism of Cold War Western, and primarily American, foreign strategies, and its self-image as a civilizational state that merits reverence (Narlikar 2006). In other words, this Indian consciousness of the magnitude and the size "of its developmental tasks and its uniqueness as a civilizational state" (Tellis2015), the leaders of India would then be moved to pursue independent strategic policies with much to teach the world about the Kantian ideal of "respect for persons"—but from an Eastern tradition. The one factor that can unite them and force them to go against the authoritarian Chinese civilizational state is that both countries have a record of being the oldest and largest democratic states. According to David Mulford, India and the U.S. are multiethnic democracies "committed to the rule of law and freedom of speech and religion" (Bhardwaj 2022). Making democracy a basic idea to build a framework against an all-mighty authoritarian state can be a reasonable basis for such an interest-based partnership. Although national interests always overshadow ideological similarities, it seems more viable to forge a working relationship, if not a strategic partnership, between U.S. and India, than between China and the other two states.

A fact largely disregarded is that the U.S. was/is more interested in chasing China than investing its resources in India and, per se, making India a strategic partner. U.S. strategic thinking has always seen India as a country that can keep the two states under check and balance the regional order. Independent analysis about India has been relegated in favor of historically looking at India vis-a-vis Pakistan, now China. The Indian state, to maintain a democratic, rules-based international order, particularly after Modi came to power in 2014, has tried to forge relationships with the U.S. and other states, an "euphemism for preventing China from usurping the America position in global affairs" (Bhardwaj 2022). On the other hand, the potential for China and India to forge a strategic and effective partnership seems very low due to low levels of mutual trust and confidence.

Although India and China are working to formalize their relationship in strategic coalitions because they have a shared interest in reshaping global organizations and a stable environment through higher national economic growth that can be pursued together, it is a common objective. But when China and India discuss preserving an open international order, they try to do so from a "different prism, different identities, and interests than the West," however, no non-Western power aims to overthrow the system altogether (Bhardwaj 2016). The incompatibility of differing world views and civilizational exceptionalism makes achieving a peaceful world order, a precarious enterprise. As Kanti Bajpai argues,

the "Indian strategic community confronts a world in which China has risen to the position of being the most powerful nation without Indian assistance or even a close relationship with New Delhi" (Malone et al. 2015). Xi Jinping wants to use the largest military in history to create a world order centered on China. In support of state dominance, pooled affluence, an innovative approach to win-win cooperation, twin distribution, and retaliation for the century of embarrassment, he has abandoned economic liberalization, an unbalanced material culture, and widespread injustice (Shankar 2022). Xi Jinping is writing his own Great Leap Forward under the pretense of transforming China into a powerful, democratic, civilized, peaceful, and contemporary communist society by 2049. He is externalizing through military assertiveness like Mao did, especially against Taiwan and India. The dangers presented by Jinping's "over-concentrated power are not confined within china's borders but extend to the world beyond" (Shirk 2018). But it is not only about the role of new leadership and the lack of clarity over the Line of Actual Control (LAC); both nations view their political systems as more certain routes to security and prosperity and consider themselves as beacons for Asia. If this theory is right, the India-China conflict goes much deeper than a geographical disagreement, and it can only be resolved if one side comes to share the other's ideology or if one ideology is supported by the decisions made by other Asian states (Garver2002).

Another aspect of trilateral partnerships connected with the so-called (imaginary) civilizational uniqueness is the mutual adaptation or denial of status. A hegemon may acknowledge the status of one actor while denying it to a third party. Strategic triangles cause a status dilemma for states by accepting status differentiation. According to William Wohlforth, a state encounters a status dilemma when it believes that another state is attempting to undermine its standing and then acts in a way that could jeopardize the other state's efforts to do the same (William Wohlforth in Paul & Underwood 2019). When the authorities at the higher echelons of a state feel that the status it currently enjoys falls short of the position it deserves, conflict is likely to result, as is shown by empirical studies (Paul & Underwood 2019). Facilitating prestige to a growing power reduces the influence of recognized authority and raises the price and challenges of giving status to additional triangle members. As a result, states will be hesitant to accept the status aspirations of other triangle actors, especially if they are prospective enemies. Recognition of status matters a lot in the connection between China, India, and the U.S. India and the U.S. had a tense relationship due to Washington's decision to punish India for its nuclear tests while simultaneously elevating China as a strategic ally in 1972. Throughout the history of these three states, the status dilemma has shaped the course of events between them. As T.V. Paul and E. Underwood argue that a policy change has taken place where "the United States is slowly elevating the status of India, but China is refusing to do so" (Paul & Underwood 2019). China does not like the prospect of India's standing improving due to the promotion of India as a strategic partner and the enlargement of U.S. objectives in the Indo-Pacific. PRC is aiming to maintain the Indo-Pak competition to maintain India's status as a regional power at par with Pakistan, while India, through its Look East and Act East programs, aspires to go outside the peripheral area and have significant power. The United States and East Asian nations are crucial for raising India's standing since their support immediately lowers China's promotion to become the sole Asian force of key importance and thwarts its status aspirations.

The U.S. itself has been unhappy and frustrated with the fall in its status throughout the globe as China, India, and other players have swollen in ranks. A deliberate attempt at not giving the devil its due has been the official policy of China, Russia, and other states which see the U.S. as the bastion of all problems and the source of evil. This feeling of unease is influenced by external material variables and the ontological ambiguity connected to power shifts within the strategic triangle. Hence the subtlety of status dilemma and identity crisis among the triad generates a new behavior of ontological insecurity among them and negatively impacts the world order.

## **Conclusion**

The disruption in the US-China-India triangular ties and the shifting power equations in the triangle would shape the emerging world order in the coming decades. As no single state in the triangle is ready to give concessions to the other side, they are caught up in a low-level stability snare and obdurately follow a dialectical terminology of zero-sum games, and the world order is likely to sink into the Thucydides trap. The blueprint of a new global order is evident, but we "do not know yet the result or whether it will turn out as world disorder" (Schmidt 2014). The evolving nature of this type of strategic triangular relationship has a lot in store for the changing global order.

The above discussion on the trilateral working relationship of India, the U.S., and China and the concomitant nature of the current and future world order has been laid down. China wants to dominate the Indo-Pacific region and sees itself as a self-proclaimed leader of Asia and a harbinger of new world order. No doubt Beijing has the resources and the capability to dominate the region. It is already on the verge of creating a new international order or, as some analysts argue, a parallel order, or bending the world order according to their wish; it cannot look away from the geopolitical ambitions and power politics of other states, particularly India and U.S. So external actors constrain its recalcitrant behavior and limits what it wants to achieve. The logical takeaway would be that China would not topple the world order soon but could put the system under stress and try to make as much room as possible for its authoritarian world order.

For the greater part, the U.S. has been greedy and averse to other states' interests, but the game is different this time. The states challenging its dominance are not the poor African nations or the crisis-ridden Middle Eastern states; they are the fastest-growing economies and are well above it in many sectors/indicators. Additionally, they can challenge any situation arising from the aggressive attitude of the U.S. All the three states are well aware of these facts. Still, the U.S. has deliberately tried to forget what it should have taken upon itself to remind the other states of the system. Hence, for the coming times, "it will be neither China's world nor America's: international leadership will be contested" (Kupchan 2012). Also, "the fate of Pax Americana, and that of the international order, will be determined by the outcome of the Sino-American rivalry" (Jacques 2009), where both sides would like New Delhi to pick sides.

And whether Washington likes it or not, irrespective of its choice, the international order is likely to undergo tectonic changes of the scale and nature unimaginable to it and other states of the strategic triangle.

Another aspect that can reshape the world order for the better and accommodate the claims of the developed states, particularly China and India, is the proper space accorded to them on the world stage and in international institutions. For a long time, the U.S., the only hegemonic state and hence the creator and facilitator of the world order, kept the LRBWO alive despite many challenges and strains coming internally and externally. Internally the erosion of democratic credentials and externally, the rise of illiberal or authoritarian states have been the cause of concern for the American-led order. China, along with Russia, North Korea, Iran, and other like-minded states, if able to turn down the very liberal principles and if getting successful in making the international environment more suitable for the undemocratic states, can act as a last nail in the coffin for the LRBWO as well as for the peaceful strategic dialogues between the strategic triangle. Therefore, the U.S. should not miss the opportunity of keeping rising India close to itself and should work hard to fasten the knot of the strategic friendship with India. It should provide all necessary help and assistance to India to make it a strong democratic state to keep the dragon under check, which ultimately would give birth to a new era where India and the U.S. can work together to solidify the true liberal world order, based on the equal respect for the sovereign rights of states and violation of the international rules severely penalized.

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### **Notes**

1. For such a view see Robert Gilpin, (US power, pp. 103–104) and Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 357–61.
2. Kennedy, *Rise and fall*; Robert Gilpin, *The political economy of international relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); David Calleo, *The imperious economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Samuel P. Huntington, 'Coping with the Lippmann gap', *Foreign Affairs* 66: 3, 'America and the world 1987', May–June 1988, pp. 453–77.
3. On these issues, see Thomas Piketty, *The economics of inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2015); Robert J. Gordon, *The rise and fall of American growth: the US standard of living since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); David Goodhart, *The road to somewhere: the populist revolt and the future of politics* (London: Hurst, 2017).



4. Martin Wolf, 'How the developed world lost its edge', Financial Times, 20 July 2017, p. 7. On the West-to-East power shift, see Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's rise and America's decline. From Obama to Trump and beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2017).
5. On the 'forever wars', see Andrew Bacevich, *America's war for the greater Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016).
6. Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Seminar on Learning and Implementing the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Party. *Xinhua* [], *January, 11, 2021*.
7. For full text of PM Narendra Modi's Historic Speech in the US Congress, see India Today, 6 June 2016, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/full-text-of-pmnarendra-modis-historic-speech-in-the-us-congress/1/687644.html>.( Accessed 21 June, 2023 )
8. P. S. Raghavan, "The Making of India's Foreign Policy: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2017), pp. 326–341; "India Is No Longer 'Non-Aligned', Says Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale," *The Print*, 10 January 2019, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-is-no-longer-non-aligned-says-foreign-secretaryvijay-gokhale/176222/>.( Accessed 21 June, 2023 )
9. Christopher Walker, Minxin Pie, Aaron L. Friedberg, Michael Pillsbury, Elizabeth C. Economy, etc., are the authors who have made the same arguments. But it's important to note that even views on China vary among these scholars, and not all of them agree on the exact characterization of PRC's as a revisionist authoritarian state.

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