



An Analysis of India's "Strategic Autonomy" through the Lens of Triangular Relationship Theory

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Abstract: Based on Dittmer's triangular theory, India's "strategic autonomy" is essentially a process of seeking balance within multiple, overlapping triangular interactions, yet it gets into a systemic dilemma under the structural pressures of these triangular relationships. Specifically, in the China-Pakistan-India triangle, the close links between China and Pakistan create structural constraints on India, forcing it to devote strategic resources to coping while reinforcing its dependence on external actors to reverse unfavorable situations. In the China-U.S.-India triangle, India's approach of "aligning with the U.S. to contain China" leads to strategic vacillation due to the limited security cooperation and political trust offered by the U.S., coupled with India's emphasis on "strategic autonomy". In the China-Russia-India triangle, the coexistence of Russia-India cooperation and China-Russia strategic collaboration forms a complex games within multiple agendas. Russia's strategic "turning to the East" and the deepening China-Russia collaboration weaken India's utility in leveraging Russia to balance China. These triangles are not isolated but interconnected. India's "alignment with the U.S. against China" triggers Russia's distrust toward India, while its excessive reactions to China-Pakistan dynamics strengthen its strategic dependence on the U.S. and Russia. Furthermore, the interplay between India's insufficient intrinsic capabilities and external systemic pressures traps it in the paradox of "strategic autonomy": the more it seeks balance, the deeper its dependence becomes.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, triangles, structural pressures

1. Introduction

The theory of triangular relationships offers a vital framework for analyzing power dynamics in international politics, positing that within any three-actor system, a shift in the relationship between two parties invariably impacts the third, thereby recalibrating the overall balance of power. While this lens has been applied to examine various bilateral and trilateral dynamics, a significant research gap persists in understanding how multiple, interlocking triangles collectively shape a major power's core strategic objectives—particularly in complex, real-world settings.

Research Gap: Prior studies often examine triangles in isolation. There is limited analysis of how India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is structurally conditioned by its simultaneous position in the China-Pakistan-India, China-U.S.-India, and China-Russia-India triangles, and how pressures from these overlapping structures produce paradoxical policy outcomes.

Research Objectives: This study aims to: analyze the combined structural effect of these three key triangles on India; explain the paradox of India's "adaptive failure"—where its efforts to enhance autonomy reinforce strategic dependence; examine how India's military diversification creates compatibility dilemmas and an illusion of autonomy.

In essence, this paper argues that the limitations of India's strategic autonomy are not merely policy failures but are structurally conditioned outcomes of its position within competing triangular dynamics. By deconstructing the interactive logic of these interlocked triangles, this analysis seeks to reveal the precise constraints India faces in its pursuit of strategic autonomy under multidimensional structural pressure.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study employs triangular relationship theory as its core analytical framework, integrated with the power-structure perspective of structural realism. Through this theoretical synthesis, it proposes an "structural interlocking" analytical framework.

From the perspective of the formation of triangular relationship theory, it bears certain similarities to structural realism, in which the units are sufficiently interconnected. On the one hand, the arrangement of the constituent units within the system and the principles underlying this arrangement give rise to the "structure". On the other hand, maintaining this "structure" relies on the continuous interaction and mutual engagement among the constituent units.

Although ideational and institutional factors may play important role in international politics, the configuration of triangle remains fundamentally shaped by the power ratio among the actors. As Kenneth Waltz argued, "Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units". The distribution of power exerts a decisive influence on relations among units. Moreover, "states' behavior varies more with differences of power than with differences in ideology, property relations, or governmental form. In a self-help system, the pressures of competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures".^[1] Thus, within triangular frameworks, power remains a primary determinant



of structural dynamics and behavioral outcomes.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 Classical Perspectives: The Cold War Foundations

As a crucial analytical tool for examining great power dynamics, the classical theory of triangular relationships was developed within the specific historical and strategic context of the Cold War. The earliest systematic theoretical interpretation is attributed to Martin Wight.

He posited that triangular relationships, much like struggles, representing a state of conflict that tends to dissipate through war. Although the U.S.-China-Russia triangle has not yet dissolved, historical precedents offer no alternative conclusions. Based on this, Wight further identified three essential features of triangular relationships: the existence of a state system, a balance of power among the three actors—each possessing sufficient strength to dominate the world in the absence of the other two because of mutual suspicion, tension, and hostility that precludes the formation of alliances, even temporary ones, between any two actors.^[2, p.42]

The classical analysis was significantly refined and formalized by Lowell Dittmer, who introduced game theory to construct a typology of strategic triangles. Dittmer defined a triangle as a "transaction among three players"^[3] and categorized their interactions into four primary models based on the pattern of amity and enmity: *Ménage à trois* (symmetrically friendly relations among all three), Romantic triangle (a strategic pivot friendly with two hostile wings), Stable marriage (two players allied against a common third), and Unit veto (mutual hostility among all three). Dittmer's models provided a powerful static framework for analyzing the U.S.-China-Soviet triangle, which was the paradigmatic case of his era. His examination was explicitly situated within the Cold War context, leading him to later argue that the specific conditions for the formation of such clear-cut strategic triangles had dissolved with the Soviet Union's collapse.

2.2.2 Modern Perspectives: Adaptation and Expansion in the Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalization challenged the classical framework, prompting scholars to adapt and expand triangular theory to a more complex, multipolar world. Contemporary scholarship argues that while the stark bipolarity of the Cold War has faded, triangular dynamics have not disappeared but have instead become more fluid, multifaceted, and embedded within both global and regional contexts.

The evolution of the U.S.-China-Russia relationship demonstrates the persistence of great power triangularity at the global level,^[4] albeit with more nuanced and shifting alignments. Concurrently, the rise of emerging powers and the increased agency of Global South states have driven the proliferation of regional strategic triangles. Scholars now emphasize that "strategic triangles are not only global but also regional in significance".^[2, p.41] This shift acknowledges that regional powers like India, Pakistan, and Brazil actively shape and are shaped by triangular dynamics within their neighborhoods, often while navigating relationships with extra-regional great powers.

Furthermore, modern analyses contend that the nature of interaction within triangles has transformed. The diversification of global issue agendas—encompassing economics, technology, climate, and non-traditional security—means that competition and cooperation coexist within the same triangular relationship. Consequently, while military strength remains relevant, diplomatic tactics, economic statecraft, and strategic deterrence in non-military domains have become critically important.^[5] This complexity has led to the study of "linked" or "complex triangles", where multiple triangular relationships overlap and interact, a significant departure from analyzing triangles in isolation as in classical models. The theory, therefore, has evolved from a tool for parsing bipolar-era confrontation to a flexible framework for understanding layered alignment patterns and constrained strategic choice in a networked international system.

2.3 Theorizing "Structural Interlocking" and "Migration of Triangles"

Building upon Dittmer's theoretical model of triangular relationships, this study proposes the concepts of (structural) interlocking and migration. A core objective of this research is to elevate these terms from mere descriptive labels to explanatory analytical tools with substantive theoretical power.

2.3.1 "(Structural) Interlocking" and Its Relationship to Dittmer's Model

First, the contribution of Dittmer's model lies in its construction of a typology for internal interaction patterns within a single triangle (e.g., romantic triangle, stable marriage). This model is inherently static and closed, focusing on the combinatorial state of the three bilateral relationships within a given triangle and assuming that the influence of the external environment or other triangles is constant or negligible.

Second, scholars (e.g., S. Mahmud Ali, T. V. Paul and Erik Underwood, Seongji Woo) have already noted that triangular relationships do not exist in isolation.^[6] Their works employ terms such as "overlapping", "coexistence" and "complexity" to describe multiple triangles. However, such studies largely stop at describing the "coexistence" or "linkage" of multiple triangles without systematically elaborating how they interact to generate new, systemic causal effects. They often treat multiple triangles as a parallel or intersecting set rather than as an integrated "structure of structures" possessing emergent properties.

2.3.2 The Concept of "(Structural) Interlocking"

This term refers to a systemic condition in a specific geopolitical region (e.g., South Asia), wherein multiple triangular relationships sharing a common actor as a node (e.g., India) become nested and mutually reinforcing in terms of structure and pressure, mediated by the strategic choices and role transmission of this core actor. This "interlocking" entails that any positional change within one triangle is transmitted through the core node to other triangles, resulting in a systemic constraint on the strategic space of the pivotal actor.

At the theoretical level, this term elevates the subject of analysis from "a single triangle" to "a system of interlocking triangles". It not only acknowledges the multiplicity of triangles but, more importantly, emphasizes the structural network they form through a shared nodal actor and the resultant holistic pressure. It further reveals the core mechanism of

interlocking: role transmission and the pressure feedback loop. This mechanism explains why a state's pursuit of "strategic autonomy" (e.g., India's) can devolve into a systemic predicament, rather than merely facing discrete challenges within several independent triangles.

2.3.3 The Concept of "Migration" of Triangular Relationships

This concept denotes the process whereby an actor (typically a wing or the pivot within a triangle), in response to the structural pressures it endures within a dominant triangle, actively or passively shifts its strategic focus, alliance-building, or conflict coordination to engage a third party, thereby constructing a new, alternative, or complementary triangular relationship. This constitutes not merely a tactical adjustment but a structural relocation of the strategic game's arena.

Theoretically, "migration" highlights an actor's move to transcend the original triangular framework by introducing new, often more powerful, external actors to reconfigure the strategic environment. It represents a core strategy for actors coping with the pressures of "interlocking". Crucially, the concept re-injects agency (seeking external balancing, flexible diplomacy) into structural analysis, while simultaneously acknowledging that such agency is constrained by the broader systemic balance of power (e.g., the U.S.-China power ratio fundamentally shapes the parameters of the U.S.-China-India triangle).

3. Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study and process-tracing method. Centering on India, it selects three key triangular relationships as analytical cases.

3.2 Case Selection

The primary aim of case selection is theoretical testing and extension. At the theoretical representativeness level, the three selected cases respectively represent distinct classic models within triangular relationship theory and correspond to different types of structural pressures faced by India. This design facilitates a systematic comparative analysis across varied strategic contexts. At the policy relevance level, this study connects to India's core strategies like the "Act East Policy" and "strategic autonomy".

The China-Pakistan-India Triangle (regional triangle): This case is selected to analyze the most direct regional strategic squeeze India endures within a long-standing, highly adversarial triangular structure. It constitutes the primary impetus and foundational context for India's pursuit of "strategic autonomy".

The U.S.-China-India Triangle (global-regional interactivity): This case is chosen to examine how India attempts to leverage a global-level triangle to mitigate dilemmas posed by a regional one. It specifically tests the efficacy and limitations of the "migration" strategy by analyzing how this move simultaneously exposes India to the risk of being instrumentalized within great power competition.

The China-Russia-India Triangle (strategic hedging): This case is selected to investigate how India, within a context of not being able to rely fully on the United States, utilizes this intrinsically contradictory triangle for multi-directional hedging. It reveals the complex calculus behind India's "strategic autonomy", which involves balancing and differentiating between major powers, making it a critical case for testing role conflict and strategic oscillation within a structure of interlocking triangles.

3.3 Analytical Steps

3.3.1 Structural Modeling

This study translates the three triangular relationships into theoretical models, annotating the relational attributes (cooperative/competitive) between actors, the power ratios, and role types.

3.3.2 Dynamic Mapping

This study traces the "migration" and interlocking of the triangular relationships during critical periods, particularly examining how India attempts to reconfigure triangular balances through "aligning with the U.S. to counter China".

3.3.3 Mechanism Testing

It tests the causal pathway of "structural pressure → role lock-in → strategic oscillation", analyzing why India's policy choices often fall into an "input-ineffectiveness" cycle.

3.3.4 Comparative Analysis

By comparing India's strategic efficacy across different triangles, it reveals the structural and unit-level roots of the limitations on its "strategic autonomy".

3.4 Expected Contributions

3.4.1 Theoretical level

This study seeks to enrich the application of triangular relationship theory within asymmetric multipolar systems and proposes an analytical paradigm centered on the "migration of triangular relationships".

3.4.2 Policy level

This study aims to provide a structuralism explanation for understanding India's strategic dilemmas and to forecast the evolutionary trends of the power structure within South Asia.

4. Contents

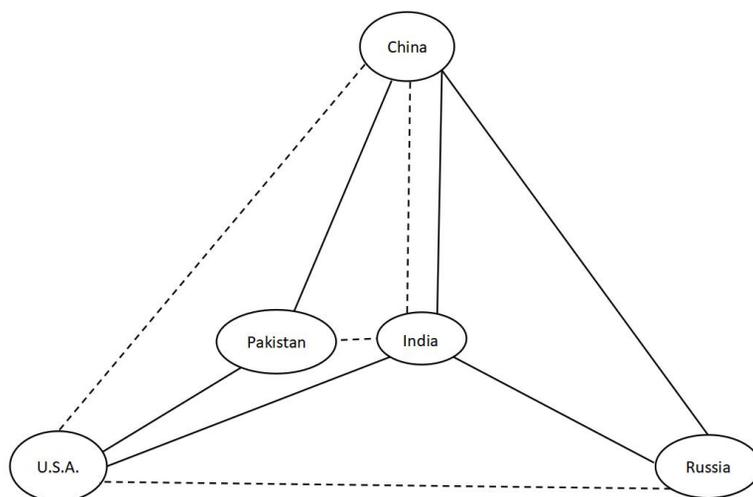
4.1 The Evolution of Triangular Relationships in South Asia

The end of the Cold War has exerted a series of impacts on the power structure of South Asia. In addition to traditional regional powers such as India and Pakistan continuously adjusting their geopolitical strategies, the strategic maneuvering of major powers like the United States, China, and Russia has also significantly influenced the geopolitical landscape of

South Asia, resulting in a dynamic coexistence and interaction of multiple triangular relationships.

Firstly, the formation of multiple triangular relationships has led to interactive and resonant effects. Within India's geopolitical calculations for South Asia, China and Pakistan represent two critical variables. Historically, India's interactions and conflicts with China and Pakistan have given rise to what scholars term the "China-Pakistan-India triangle", which aligns with Dittmer's "stable marriage" model characterized by friendly relations between China and Pakistan, alongside tensions and frictions between each of them and India. However, in response to such structural pressures, India has chosen to align with the United States to identify strategic common ground for containing China, thereby forming the "U.S.-China-India triangle". Within this triangle, the competitive dynamics between both the U.S. and India vis-à-vis China create another "new stable marriage" configuration. Nevertheless, India has no desire to serve as a mere "pawn" for the United States in balancing China or sustaining U.S. hegemony. While engaging in "aligning with the U.S. to counter China", India continues to adhere to its principle of "strategic autonomy", participating partially in U.S.-led efforts to counterbalance China. As Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has stated, India prioritizes its own interests in formulating foreign policy, and India's foreign policy is not a "replica" of the policies or directives of other nations. India makes its own decisions and will not alter its foreign policy under coercion.^[7] This not only reflects firm support for Modi's "strategic autonomy", but also indicates India's cautious stance toward "aligning with the West". More importantly, it signals India's aspiration to secure a significant position in a multipolar world.

Against this backdrop, with the aim of enhancing coordination and cooperation in areas such as regional security, counterterrorism, economic development, and multilateralism—and further promoting the democratization and multipolarization of international relations—India, along with China and Russia, seeks to counterbalance the challenges posed by the United States in Eurasia and establish a global order favorable to emerging powers. The impetus provided by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov further contributed to the formation of the China-Russia-India triangle.^[8] However, in terms of its sphere of influence, India's strategic vision confines this triangle largely to South Asia and its adjacent regions. ^[9] Thus, the power structure in South Asia has evolved into a pattern centered on India, characterized by interlocking and coexisting multiple triangular relationships, as illustrated in the figure below:



Note:(1) This diagram was created by the author. (2) Solid lines indicate friendly or positive relations, while imaginal lines represent competitive or negative relations. (3) The representation of these relations is not fixed. As interstate relations adjust dynamically, the nature of these connections remains in a continuous state of flux and mutual transformation. (4) Regarding the China-Russia-India triangle, the relationships among the three actors are marked by contradiction and complexity. On the one hand, the tensions between China and India lend this triangle certain characteristics of a "romantic triangle". On the other hand, the interaction and cooperation among the three on regional and international issues introduce positive elements into China-India relations, thereby also giving the triangle features of a "ménage à trois". (5) Triangular relationships such as China-Pakistan-U.S., China-Pakistan-Russia, and U.S.-Russia-India have received relatively limited discussion in the academic literature. Relevant references are provided in the notes.^[10]

Secondly, the structural interlocking of triangular relationships leads to the formation of a closed loop in pressure transmission, thereby locking India into its role within these triangles and reinforcing its "strategic oscillation." As noted above, South Asia features multiple, overlapping triangular relationships. The various triangular models centered on India together construct a hierarchical power architecture. Thus, the coexistence of various triangular structures in South Asia creates a condition of role interlock, whereby India's position in one triangle may affect its bargaining and maneuvering capital in others. The lack of compatibility among these different triangular structures makes India prone to falling into a cycle of "input – ineffectiveness" in its strategic engagements. In essence, the nesting and incompatibility of different triangular structures within the India-centered power architecture of South Asia constrain India's "strategic autonomy," resulting in a form of structural role interlock.

Therefore, from India's geopolitical strategic perspective, the overall power structure in South Asia is characterized primarily by the China-Pakistan-India and U.S.-China-India triangles. In the short term, the trend of U.S.-India collaboration to contain China and their strategic convergence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region is gradually

strengthening, further complicating China's surrounding strategic environment. In the long term, the U.S.-China-India triangle exhibits a dynamic balance marked by intertwined competition and cooperation.

From the perspective of structural models and pressures in triangular relationships, India could serve as a "pivot" country that maintains positive relations with both China and the United States while "observing" their competition. Alternatively, it could align with China to constrain the hegemonic power (i.e., the United States) or assist the United States in maintaining its hegemony to counterbalance China. This demonstrates that India's perception of structural pressures, including its strategic pressure perception within triangular relationships, will drive the U.S.-China-India triangle to maintain a delicate and dynamic balance, influence the China-Pakistan-India triangular relationship, and collectively shape the regional dynamics in South Asia.

4.2 Interpretation of Current Developments

Regarding India's predicament within the China-Pakistan-India triangle, Indian General Philip Cambose argues that China consistently perceives India as both a global and regional competitor. Precisely because China seeks to undermine India's status and ambitions at the global level, it leverages its friendly relations with Pakistan by providing equipment, training, logistical support, and technological assistance. This ensures that, in any future India-Pakistan conflict, China would act as a supportive partner to Pakistan. Moreover, such Sino-Pakistani collusion and cooperation could impose a "two-front" dilemma on India.^[11]

On how to break this deadlock, defense columnist Mandeep Singh contends that India must anchor its defense objectives, modernization efforts, and reforms squarely on China. It is imperative to rectify the imbalance in defense capabilities vis-à-vis China—a priority that has gained renewed emphasis following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash.^[12]

In April 2025, during his visit to India, Vance reiterated the United States' commitment to the potential sale of F-35 fighter aircraft to India. This move was framed as a measure to further enhance the Indian Air Force's capability to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and deter regional threats.^[13] Subsequently, in May 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth emphasized the U.S. intent to expand its defense partnership with India, explicitly stating the objective of cultivating India as a key defense partner.^[14]

However, close India-U.S. cooperation has not ameliorated India's strategic environment within the compound triangular relationship structure. The Trump administration's persistent imposition of tariff pressures on India has, to some extent, strained bilateral relations. More importantly, India's adherence to the philosophy of "strategic autonomy" entails a recognition of the limitations inherent in "exclusive" alliances, understanding that alignment with any single power would constrain its interests across different regions and issue areas.^[15]

Regarding the China-Russia-India triangle, despite having convened 18 meetings at the foreign ministerial level by 2021, its institutionalization has been affected to a certain extent by Western sanctions against Russia, Sino-Indian border conflicts, and U.S.-China competition. Concurrently, China hopes to utilize the China-Russia-India triangle to strengthen multilateral cooperation, which would not only advance its Belt and Road Initiative but also promote regional peace and stability. India, while seeking enhanced cooperation, aims for the triangle to facilitate its "great-power aspirations" and maintain policy independence.

Furthermore, all three parties maintain close ties with the United States, whose influence over each significantly outweighs their mutual influence. This dynamic, as noted in the literature, "places severe constraints on their attempt to congregate and forge a 'strategic triangle'".^[16] Consequently, the structural pressures inherent in this triangular relationship make it difficult to reconcile their divergent interests, significantly impeding India's pursuit of "strategic autonomy".

5. Conclusion

5.1 Potential Pathways for India to Transcend Structural Pressure

The perspective of multiple, overlapping triangular relationships in South Asia indicates the predicament of India's "strategic autonomy". The China-Pakistan-India, U.S.-China-India, and China-Russia-India triangles do not exist in isolation; rather, these triangles deeply interact and exert systematic pressure on India's strategic choices through the dynamics of the power structure. India's reality demonstrates that "strategic autonomy" is relative under structural constraints, that is to say, addressing the challenges posed by one triangular relationship cannot be separated from transforming one or more other such relationships.^[17] Changes in relations among actors cannot be explained through any single triangular structure alone.

Can India break free from "structural pressure" and achieve "strategic autonomy"? This question is influenced by multiple, interacting factors. According to the logic of structural realism outlined above-mentioned, the distribution of capabilities among units fundamentally determines structural pressure. Consequently, breakthrough growth in India's economic, technological, and defense sectors would directly alter its power ratio within triangles such as the U.S.-China-India and China-Russia-India, thereby alleviating its passive position.

Simultaneously, following the theoretical premise of "migration", India could attempt to reconfigure the composition and interactive logic of triangular structures by introducing new actors or issue areas. For instance, by actively strengthening the India-Japan-Australia nexus, India could expand the strategic playing field from South Asia to the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Pacific, and even global governance agendas (e.g., climate change, digital norms). This strategic diversification would help disperse the concentrated pressure emanating from the China-Pakistan-India and U.S.-China-India triangles, creating new leverage points and room for maneuver.

5.2 Conditions for Mitigating Structural Constraints

5.2.1 Accelerated Multipolarity in the International System

Should U.S.-China competition evolve towards a protracted, relatively balanced rivalry, and if other powers like European

Union, Japan, and ASEAN enhance their strategic independence, India would gain greater hedging space among a more diversified array of powers. Conversely, a descent into a "new Cold War" marked by rigid bloc confrontation would dramatically increase India's pressure to choose sides, severely constraining its autonomy.

5.2.2 Windows of Opportunity during Technological Revolutions and Rule-Making

During formative periods for rules governing emerging domains like artificial intelligence, space, and cyberspace, India has a critical window. If it can establish itself as a co-architect of technical standards, it would occupy a pivotal, "swing" position within issue-specific triangles. This could partially offset its traditional geopolitical disadvantages and grant it disproportionate influence in shaping the future international order in these key areas.

In summary, India cannot completely escape the structural pressure inherent in triangular relationships. However, it can potentially expand its autonomous space within the interlocking triangular network through a composite strategy of "capacity-building, strategic migration, and dynamic hedging". The success of India's policies depends on a confluence of factors: sustained internal capability development, a favorable evolution of the external environment toward fluid multipolarity, and sufficient strategic patience and flexibility. Ultimately, India's "strategic autonomy" is unlikely to be a static achievement. Instead, it should be understood as a dynamic, continuous process of seeking to maximize relative autonomy amidst ever-shifting triangular structures.

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