The China-Pakistan-US Strategic Triangle: From Cold War to the War on Terrorism—an Objection to Paul J. Smith’s Article

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Introduction

The concept of strategic triangles was developed by Lowell Dittmer [1] and Gerald Segal [2] in the early eighties, describing the triangular relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China during the Cold War. While a strategic triangle may help to understand the interrelated behavior of three diverse international actors, Segal and Dittmer never promoted their model as a formula to enable complex relationships. Instead, strategic triangles present themselves after a common and long-term interest is identified by all three participating states. Contrary to Segal and Dittmer’s original idea, Paul J. Smith claims that the active composition of a strategic triangle between Pakistan, China, and the US lead to a long-term stabilization of Pakistan [3].

In opposition to Smith’s thesis, this paper argues that the presented view of a strategic triangle between Pakistan, China and the US is in essence flawed – because first, the mutual basis of long-term common interests is absent; second, a strategic triangle without a common basis is too complex to maintain beyond occasional, short-term convergences. In its place, the US should focus on strategic partnerships that share similar goals in the long run. To make this case, this paper will first contrast the original concept of the strategic triangle to Smith’s analysis, followed by a few remarks on the nature of complexity in international relations as a different view on the evidence presented in the article. Finally, this paper suggests that the strategic triangle India – China – US is a better alternative for long-term stability in the region.

The Misunderstood Concept of Strategic Triangles

By further developing the idea of strategic triangles, Woo (2003) argues that the most desirable position in a strategic triangle is the “pivotal position” in relation to the two “wing” positions [4]. The pivot enjoys friendly relations to the two other nations, where the two wing states are hostile to each other. An example in Smith’s article is the “first convergence”, where not the US, but Pakistan is the pivot and China and the US are “wings”. But at any moment, the dynamics within the triangle might change significantly. A “wing” may change to an “outcast”, which has negative relations to both other states, whereas the remaining two states become partners [5]. In Smith’s article, this is the situation after the Navy SEALs raid in Abbottabad, resulting in “Islamabad’s subsequent turn to China” [3] (p197-198) and the US suddenly becoming the outcast in this triangular relationship. Smith, however, ignores this dynamic and mysteriously argues for the prospect of a long lasting “three friends” triangle, where every state in it enjoys friendly and stable relationships to the other two states.

Yet according to Camilla Soeenssen (2006), all friends triangles are highly unlikely: “it is necessary for the pivot to manage [my emphasis] the degree of hostility between the two other states, and this will often be difficult as they have different interests, strategies, and capabilities [my emphasis]” [6]. Clearly, Pakistan is neither able nor willing to fill this role in the long-term, despite of its exceptional pivotal role during the “first convergence”. As Smith himself admits, instead of managing the relationship between the US and China, Pakistan has regularly and repeatedly played off both states against each other [3]. In short, Smith’s Pakistan – China – US strategic triangle is a misconception.

Some International Relations are too Complex to Control

Besides this misconception, Smith himself points out that US interests may again shift away from Pakistan to a pre-9/11 condition [3], where “US engagement with Pakistan largely declined and was complicated by an array of economic and military sanctions” [3]. Yet according to Neil Harrison [7], the unpredictable complexity of international relations often result from perceptions and the reactions based on them. While Smith may view the “convergences” as a positive trend in US-Pakistan relations, Pakistan itself may perceive America’s pivot to the Pacific and the resulting shift away in bewilderment and act accordingly.

China – India – US is the Better Strategic Triangle for the Long-Term

Apart from ambiguities regarding Pakistan’s perceptions and reactions, the country’s entire future is uncertain: two out of three future scenarios paint a disturbing picture for Pakistan by 2020 [8]. In contrast, Pakistan’s neighbor India will most probably be the world’s third-largest economy within the next 30 years [9]. Thus it is India, China, and the US that share a similar long-term vision of prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Even the Pentagon agrees, viewing India not only as a “regional economic anchor”, but also as a “provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region” [10]. While Smith argues for the inclusion of Pakistan, the region might actually be stabilized more effectively through the exclusion of Pakistan from a strategic triangle of heavy weights.

Conclusion

Overall, Smith largely misunderstands the concept of strategic triangles. A beneficial triangular relationship presupposes, as a minimum, a long-term common goal. But Pakistan, China, and the US are too unequal in every respect to be able to form a prospering strategic triangle. In this sense, the “three convergences” are the
exception, and not the rule in the relations between Pakistan, China, and the US. Moreover, a strategic triangle including Pakistan will probably destabilize the relations among China and the US, rather than stabilize Pakistan. Instead, and from a realist point of view, the alternative strategic triangle India – China – US shares a common, long-term vision to collectively stabilize and deter Pakistan, and even to contain and discipline it, should Pakistan misbehave or should the Pakistani state collapse.

References