
JIPSS

JOURNAL FOR INTELLIGENCE,
PROPAGANDA AND SECURITY STUDIES

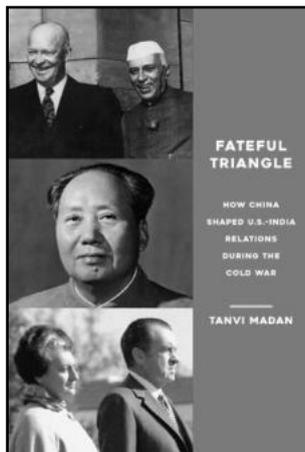
Published by ACIPSS Vo1. 15, No. 2/2021

9/11 20JAHRE 20YEARS

EIN JIPSS SCHWERPUNKT – A JIPSS FOCUS



BOOK, FILM, PODCAST & MUSEUM REVIEWS



Tanvi Madan,
Fateful Triangle: How China shaped US-India relations during the Cold War

(Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020), 397 pages, ISBN: 978-0-670093755, USD 33,96.

In the current world order and geopolitics, some developments are considered axiomatic: the changing balance of global power, talks on India's potential as a counter to China, and India-US convergences on the issue of managing China. In the extant literature, these events are generally projected as contemporary occurrences. However, as Tanvi Madan's book deftly communicates, these patterns of geopolitics are not new. They were present during the Cold War era and determined the trajectory of Indo-US ties. The book brings out the details and nuances of Indo-US diplomatic history from 1949 to 1979 and how China shaped their bilateral equation. By delving deep into this underexplored research area, Madan breaks the tradition of examining the US-India Cold War ties through the Pakistan prism. The book offers an in-depth analysis through extensive archival work from the US and India, which is presented chronologically and in an easy-to-understand narrative. Madan argues that although both India and the US were wary of China's rise, they shared periods of convergence and divergence over their perception of the China threat and how to respond to it.

When India emerged as an independent country in 1947, Washington was indifferent to the development. With the rise of a communist China and Soviet nuclear tests in 1949, the US' attention was drawn towards India. The American leadership hoped to invest their energies in nurturing India as a part of the "answer to its China problem" (25). However, as Washington soon realised, India and the US had differing opinions on managing China. Unlike the US, which wished to focus on an anti-communist

grouping, Nehru-led India saw value in engaging China with the international community and socialise it into becoming a responsible power. The contrasting views complicated the Indo-US ties as evident during the Korean War, China's invasion of Tibet and developments in Indochina. Interestingly, both countries agreed on the need to drive a wedge between the communist brotherhood of the USSR and China.

However, there was minimal progress in coordinating activities even on this front.

Despite the divergences, as Madan argues in the first part of the book, the Indo-US bilateral relations did not "rupture" because both "needed each other" (86). In the coming years, i.e. from 1956 to 1962, New Delhi and Washington enjoyed a phase of greater convergence. From the American viewpoint, it could not let India fail lest it should embrace communism. For the Indian leadership, it needed American support for its development. For both leaderships, the economic and developmental success of a democratic India was crucial over the success of a communist China. India requested for aid, which the US provided. Thus, began the fateful race between the two Asian neighbours. India's perceptions of China altered following border skirmishes in 1956 and 1957, Chinese inroad in South Asia, Tibetan uprising, and what was considered as Chinese intransigence. This contributed to growing convergence between Washington and New Delhi.

From 1959, as argued in the second part of the book, Indian and American perspectives merged on the China threat. This resulted in greater diplomatic cooperation. In subsequent years, the US provided increased economic aid and military assistance to India. The two sides also managed their differences diplomatically. By the early 1960s, both worried over the possibility of a Sino-Pakistan entente. During the 1962 Sino-India war, Indian leader Nehru requested the US for "more comprehensive assistance" (146) in fighting the Chinese. India's decision to reach out to the US was also facilitated by the Soviet Union's open support to China during the war, especially after having feigned neutrality in the preceding months. India's request for American military assistance and the eventually signed Air Defense Agreement with

the US signified an Indian willingness to be flexible when it came to nonalignment.

In the third part, Madan examines the phase of “dependence and disillusionment” (149) from 1963 to 1968, which persisted despite Indo-US agreement over the Chinese threat. Frictions reappear due to difference of outlook in some areas. Pakistan was a case in point. While Washington saw Pakistan as a “part of its China solution” (175) in Asia, New Delhi considered it a “part of the problem” (174). Washington linked its aid to India with India-Pakistan talks and eventually even connected the aid to Indian economic and agriculture reforms. The Indian leadership resented Washington for these steps. There was continued scepticism within India over depending on a single power, particularly the US. Hence, New Delhi tried to engage both the US and the USSR, which was unwelcomed by Washington. The divergences became prominent after the American leadership pushed India to align its outlook and actions vis-à-vis Vietnam. India perceived US actions in Southeast Asia as problematic even though both countries did not want to see China gaining a stronghold in the region. Adding to the deteriorating ties was the US decision to be neutral during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, and soon after suspending military and economic aid to India (and Pakistan). That the Indian leadership chose not to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, further exacerbated the bilateral ties. There was a mutual disappointment, and the bilateral differences seemed irreconcilable.

In the last part of the book, Madan examines the period from 1969 to 1979. In this phase, the geo-political alignments altered substantially, including the Sino-US rapprochement, Sino-Soviet split, and India-Soviet strengthened ties. The circumstances that emerged from these changes drifted India and

the US apart. The 1970s began with a crisis between East and West Pakistan. New Delhi was initially reluctant to get involved but eventually supported East Pakistan’s liberation. The Indian decision to dive into the crisis was complicated by possible Chinese intervention in support of Pakistan. India sought assurance from Washington vis-à-vis potential Chinese actions against New Delhi but received a lackadaisical response. This was heavily influenced by the impending Sino-US rapprochement, which was facilitated by Islamabad. Dismayed by these developments, India reached out to the USSR, which was happy to offer help, leading to the signing of the Indo-Soviet treaty. The Soviet Union’s undying support to India during the 1971 war with Pakistan heightened its popularity in India. It also illustrated New Delhi’s willingness to tilt towards a specific power (in opposition to its declared non-aligned posture) during dire needs. During the Bangladesh crisis, India was convinced that the US, China and Pakistan were colluding together to contain India. With the US and India in the opposite camps, their bilateral ties were hampered only to be resurrected two decades later.

Madan’s excellent book is an important read for scholars, policymakers, students of history and International Relations alike. It provides a historical anchor to understand the contemporary dynamics of the US-India-China triangle. At the same time, it delves deep to demonstrate that India and the US have the potential to align together to tackle the China threat but may face challenges and divergences as experienced in the past. As aptly captured in the book’s concluding words, Indo-US alignment is “neither impossible nor inevitable” (300).

Reviewed by Aditi Malhotra



Aditi Malhotra

is a PhD Candidate at the Graduate School of Politics, University of Münster, Germany. Her doctoral research focuses on the evolution of India’s security role in the Indo-Pacific region. Her area of interests includes security developments in South Asia, India’s foreign and security policy towards the Indo-Pacific region, nuclear proliferation, and nuclear security issues.

Contact: a.malhotra@acipss.org