

India's Role as a Mediator in the US-China Hegemony Conflict: A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract : This paper will study the role of India as a mediator between the USA and China's conflict for hegemony. Through the in-depth study, the paper will explore the various dimensions of relations between the US and China. The paper will emphasize India's fitness for the role of a mediator between two major powers of the world including the sources, effectiveness, challenges and major takeaways for India.

Keywords: mediation, strategic, burgeoning, counter-balancing, hegemony, indispensable, geopolitics, disintegration, competency, hegemonic, shortcoming, navigability, constrained, tranquility, the US-China, comprehensive.

Introduction - India's role as a mediator in the global conflict is deeply rooted in its history. **Sayers, Matthew R.** (2012) said that the culture of mediation derives from its ancient religious philosophy of Hinduism and Buddhism which stands on the principle of peaceful resolution of conflict. The beauty of mediation is depicted in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. One such incident is when lord Krishna mediated between the two warring parties in Mahabharata¹.

In the present world order, India positions itself as the fastest-growing economy in the world with a reliable and stable market for the world economy. India's strategic might burgeoning is not limited to the subcontinent but also to the global level (**Pillalamarri, A.**, 2023)². India being the world's largest democracy holds soft power to a considerable extent.

Schiff, J. (2005) mentioned in his article that India is endowed with a strategic position, stable growth rate and self-reliance, making it a natural ally and counter-balancing force between the USA and China hegemony conflict.³

In essence, India's role as a mediator is underpinned by its historical ethos, global presence, and the respect it commands on the world stage, making it an indispensable bridge between two of the world's superpowers.

The odyssey of the USA and China and the Status Quo: The US and China are the two most important countries in the world in terms of economy, politics, geography, defense, and power influence.

The US has been the greatest power since the First World War and has had great influence on the world since then, be it the global economy, geopolitics or soft power influence. Being the leader of the Western block and flag bearer of the democratic world order the US holds major

influence in global politics. The US controls the major global institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, WHO, and WTO. The USA has its preferences and reservations in the current world order (**Schere, E.**, 2021).⁴ Whereas, China on the other hand is a rising power in global power politics. **Mansbach, R. W., & Ferguson, Y. H.** (2021) mention that, Since the disintegration of USSR in the 1991, its successor Russia has had limited resistance competency to the US hegemony⁵. China emerged as a counterforce against the US hegemonic world order. It has overcome the shortcomings of Russia which include a closed market policy, limited navigability, constrained economy, limited foreign exchange reserves, rigid foreign policy etc. (**Foot**, 2020)⁶

After taking all of these factors into consideration and establishing a relationship between both of these countries in the present global dynamics, one inevitable question arises: Is the US and China in the Thucydides trap?

This is one of the most prominent questions of the 21st century among the various geopolitical analysts around the world. However, both sides have categorically rejected any such claims, at least publicly. Many geopolitical thinkers and political analysts have attempted to explain this situation in their understanding but the proximity of the situation can be traced in the theory of Thucydides trap.

Thucydides trap is a situation where an existing power is challenged by the emerging power for the hegemony, hence war is apparent, and it is described and popularized by Graham T. Allison, (2012). The origin of the concept is traced back to 431 BC when a military general and Athenian thinker Thucydides suggested the inevitable war between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Since Spartans feared the rising power of the Athenians which

paved the ground for the serious confrontation due to the challenge by the rising power Athens on the existing power Sparta.

Graham T. Allison (2012) in his article in The Financial Times, studied the 16 occurrences in the history of such power rivalry and found that there are 12 such instances when war happened.⁷

Taking the queue from these lines, the present relationship between the US and China is believed to be in the Thucydides trap by many strategic analysts. The changing dynamics between both countries are neither new nor disguised anymore after the recent Donald Trump's trade war with China has brought the economic tensions between the two parties into the limelight. The gigantic economic powers have eventually locked into the rivalry for hegemony (**Rushe, D.**, 2019, August 23).⁸

Sarhan, F. (2023, October 10) in his article in Forbes highlighted that it is a multidimensional conflict that is not only limited to military dominance but also extended to geopolitical, economic, trade, technology, diplomacy and human rights⁹. The tension between these two parties has a lot of stakes in the peace of the world since both are great economic and military powers.

In such a situation a third and neutral front is the need of an hour and that could be India. According to **Freedom House (2023)**, India being the largest democracy is largely appreciated and trusted by the West including the USA. It is a strong member of Asia, ¹⁰NAM (non-aligned movement) and historic relations with the USSR during the Cold War brought it closer to all non-Western countries (**Cohen, S. F.**, 2004).¹¹

India is truly a historic global leader and a Vishwa guru (global teacher). India deems fit and a perfect match for the mediator in the US-China conflict. Being a mediator between the US and China won't be a cakewalk for India¹²(**Kim and Singh, 2020**). There will be challenges associated but also there will be blessing in disguise for India. Let us discuss various aspects of the US-China conflict and the role of India as a mediator.

India's relationship with the USA:

1. Economic: India-US bilateral trade in goods and services which continued to rise and has likely surpassed \$200 billion in calendar year 2023 despite the challenging global trade environment. The bilateral goods and services trade between the US and India has almost doubled since 2014 (**United States Trade Representative, 2024**).¹³

2. Political: Both countries share the commitment to Human rights, freedom, the rule of law, democratic values and peaceful co-existence (**The White House, 2023**).¹⁴

3. Strategic: India and the USA are members of many strategic forums such as Quad (USA, India, Japan, Australia), I2U2 (Israel, India, USA, UAE), G20 etc. (**Council on Foreign Relations, 2023**).¹⁵

4. Security: Both countries share the same view on the peace and security in the Indian Ocean region and are ready

to cooperate in the counter-balancing measure against any adversaries that intend to destabilize the strategic fabric in the region by the act of aggression or otherwise (**Miller & Harris, 2023**)¹⁶.

5. Defence:

a. India and the USA have signed many pacts in the recent past which brought both countries closer to each other.

b. India has signed 4 foundational defence agreements with the USA i.e. GSOMIA (2002), LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020).

c. Joint production of GE F-414 jet engines in India will provide a boost to indigenous fighter aircraft production. (**Lalwani & Singh, 2023**)¹⁷.

India's relationship with China:

1. Historical: India was the first non-socialist country to establish a diplomatic relationship with China on April 1, 1950.

2. Cooperation: An agreement on peace and tranquillity along LAC (Line of Actual Control) was signed in 1993 and in 2005 India established a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity¹⁸(**Muni, 2020**).

3. Trade and Economic: China was India's largest trading partner between 2018 to 2021. Bilateral Trade between these two has soared to USD 136 billion (**PIB, 2022**).¹⁹

4. Recent Development: In 2014 Xi Jinping visited India. Nathu la route opened for Kailash Man Sarovar Yatra. E-Visa facility for Chinese tourists (**Bhatia, 2021**)²⁰.

Factors influencing India's role as a mediator:

1. India has had historical ties with China since ancient times, with many Chinese philosophers coming to India for their studies and research purposes²¹ such as Sima Qian (he mentioned India as Yuandu and Tiandu), Faxian (a Buddhist scholar), and Huen Sang (who met King Harshvardhan) which establishes deep cultural and historical ties with China (**Embassy of India, 2013**).

2. Similarly, India has deep strategic ties with the USA presently, the USA has recognized India as a nuclear power nation and signed a nuclear agreement in 2005 which makes it the first nation to accept India's nuclear power²²(**Sultan & Adil, 2008**).

3. India has been accepted by both countries as a non-partial and non-aggressor (**Rao, 2019**)²³**Rao, S. (2019), India's Role in Global Politics: A Comparative Analysis.**

4. India's economic dependence on China and the US makes India a remarkable candidate to mediate their conflict since the value of trade between India and the USA is \$192 billion (**United States Trade Representative, 2023**)²⁴ and the trade value between India-China for the same period is \$136 billion²⁵ (**Chinese customs, 2023**). It is highly unlikely for both the economies to ignore India largely.

5. India stands tallest in terms of infantry which show-

cases its defence capabilities.²⁶ Indian technological advancement through self-made Brahmos nuclear missiles, nuclear triad, S-400 triumph, Anti- Sat strike capabilities ensures India's dominance and self-dependency (**Kanwal, 2012**).

6. Indian democracy in principle appreciated by the USA (**The White House, 2021**)²⁷ and in practice appreciated by China (**Kohli, 2001**).²⁸
7. Its rule of law, human rights values, refugee protection and the concept of "Vasudheva Kutumbkam" represent the true nature of Indian philosophy²⁹ (**Warrier, 1953**).

Issues associated with India's mediation in the USA-China conflict:

1. Neither the USA nor China trust India's intentions. During the Cold War India formed NAM which was mainly treated as the *B-wing* of the USSR which many times infuriated the USA³⁰ (**Laskar, 2004**).
2. India's development of nuclear capabilities shocked China and made it more protectionist (**Ballawar, 2022**).³¹
3. Historically, India has never been in the block of the West nor does it have any racial similarities with the West hence there is no natural alliance (**Chatterjee, 2019**).³²
4. India and China fought a full-fledged war in 1962 and continuous border conflict made India and China hostile to each other (**Britannica, 2024**).³³
5. India's Intervention in east Pakistan and carving out the new country Bangladesh made the USA cautious (**Bose, 2011**).³⁴
6. Integration and assimilation of Sikkim as a state of India made China anxious and more cautious (**Bajpai, 2018**).³⁵
7. Both countries are poles apart, the USA is capitalist-democratic and China is a Socialist-Communist country³⁶ (**Smith, 2022**).
8. Except for trade, they do not lie on the same page. It is highly intricate for India to mediate between these two since they both have no cross-overs or any cultural influence (**Verma, 2023**).³⁷

In conclusion, it can be said that India needs to look at things as they are and not how they ought to be. It needs to align the alignments and shall not fall into the game of zero-sum game between the great power politics of Cold War 2.0 as modern political scholars term the relationship of the USA and China. There is no doubt that India is the perfect match for the mediator between the USA and China due to its historical ties, cultural values, deep strategic engagement and economic dependence. It is also true that great things come at a great cost and eventually mediation between these two has intrinsic and extrinsic challenges as well.

However, if we look purely from the perspective of India there is a *blessing in disguise for India* in the conflicting relations between USA and China. India will emerge as the great power of the world if the current situation prevails for

a longer duration. India's exports may boost in the international market. Since both are the giants of the world trade and keep slapping sanctions on each other it might create a void in the exports of food, energy, medicines and IT services to the global market which India may bridge, provided India's domestic demand fulfilment. India may witness a high number of companies shifting their bases from China to India a recent trend observed in the post covid world. The coming years are of great importance for India and it needs to be ready for any eventuality.

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