

Subject:

**International Relations**

Title:

**The Clash of Giants: India and China in the Neo-Realist Struggle for Indo-Pacific Dominance**

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Abstract:

Using a neo-realist perspective, this study investigates the strategic rivalry between India and China in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasising security issues, geopolitics, and power dynamics. It emphasises essential points, including China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's foreign balancing approach, and multilateral alliances like the Quad play. It also looks at India's policies on nuclear deterrence and reactions to China's maritime growth. The article makes the case that opposing China's influence and guaranteeing regional security depend critically on India's strategic posture, military modernisation, and diplomatic actions.

Keywords:

India-China rivalries, Indo-Pacific, neo-realism, regional institutionalism.

## Introduction

The complex relationships between India and China are primarily based on four fundamental elements: Perceptions, Parameters, Partnerships, and Power Parity, as mentioned by Kanti Bajpai in his book "India versus China: Why They are not Friends".<sup>i</sup> The author notes their ancient civilisational ties created by trade and Buddhism. However, he also notes that their current perspective is distorted by condescension and uncertainty. These misunderstandings have caused India to assess its contacts with China through strategic benefits and losses, guiding a combined External and Internal Balancing strategy.<sup>ii</sup>

However, India's capabilities are still defensive, so this will not be sufficient. Therefore, India needs to focus on external balancing as well. External balancing involves building strategic relationships with the United States and other Quad members, including Australia and Japan. These strategic alliances and cooperative efforts would help create a more balanced power dynamic by including more players, thereby influencing Asian security and its future.

Within international relations, national strategic orientation is essential for determining regional dynamics and world power balances. India, at the junction of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, occupies a geostrategic sweet spot that offers it significant influence in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>iii</sup>. This posture increases its geo-political relevance by allowing India access to trade routes, energy resources, and necessary sea lanes of communication. With China's ambitious reach into the Indian Ocean underlined by its String of Pearls approach, questions in New Delhi have been raised. Under this plan, China will construct military and commercial bases in nations around India to spread its influence and claim leadership over the area. From ports in Pakistan to Sri Lanka and beyond, China's maritime development directly challenges India's security interests and regional stability, much as a wolf in sheep's clothing discreetly encroaches on India's backyard<sup>iv</sup>. India has responded by being proactive, using multilateral alliances like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, to offset China's increasing influence, which consists of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, so providing a strategic forum for like-minded nations to cooperate on security and economic matters

in the Indo-Pacific, much as a band of brothers standing shoulder to shoulder against a common adversary.<sup>v</sup> By uniting with these powers and thereby demonstrating its will to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific system, India hopes to bolster its security. Emphasising the search for power and security in an anarchic environment, this calculated movement follows neo-realism ideas in international affairs. Like a smart chess player thinking through moves to outmanoeuvre an opponent, India tries to improve its capabilities and create alliances to protect its national interests in the face of China's forceful attitude and expansionist tendencies.<sup>vi</sup> Rising as a venue for geo-political rivalry, the Indo-Pacific sees states fight for supremacy and influence using diplomatic, economic, and military measures to further their goals. India wants to negotiate the challenging geo-political terrain of the Indo-Pacific using aggressive diplomacy, military modernisation, and multilateral collaboration, thereby guaranteeing stability and security for itself and its friends. China's deployment of a naval task group close to Australia highlights its aim to project force and test regional responses, hence indirectly threatening India's marine policy in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Strategic Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific: India and China's Power Play Through a Neo-Realist Lens**

Rising as intimidating economic powerhouses in the Indo-Pacific, India and China significantly impact commerce and investment. Still, their economic policies have significant strategic ramifications since both countries fight for supremacy in complex geopolitics.<sup>vii</sup> Viewed as possible weapons to encircle India strategically, China's ambitious projects—which range from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—cause anxiety in New Delhi.<sup>viii</sup> India responds to China's economic aggressiveness by being proactive with its “Act East” policy, which promotes connectivity and strengthens ties with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>ix</sup>

Within this dynamic field, the Indo-Pacific becomes a furnace where national destiny are created and world dynamics are moulded. Still, a significant obstacle is China's “String of Pearls” plan, which rings India with important naval ports from Djibouti to Gwadar and Hambantota. India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) campaign is not yet strong enough to offset China's established influence. The Galwan Valley conflict in 2020 vividly shows the ingrained military tensions still between India and China.<sup>x</sup> This forceful confrontation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) highlighted the explosive nature of their border disputes and their potential to escalate into full-fledged armed confrontations, raising concerns about regional stability and security.

India has developed a deterrence strategy in reaction to China's aggressive military posture, strengthening its defensive capacity through modern military weapons. India has acquired S-400 missile defence systems from Russia and Rafale aircraft from France to improve its defences against the ever-expanding Chinese military presence in the country. Such strategic achievements show India's legitimacy in discouraging Chinese aggression among growing military competitiveness and geo-political conflicts.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Contours of Influence: India-China Geopolitical Contest in the Indo-Pacific**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiatives proved rather important for its diplomatic and economic strategy in South and Southeast Asia. China has made significant infrastructure projects, including ports, railroads, and highways, in nations such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar alongside the BRI. This money seeks to restore trade lines and connections and increase China's impact in regions usually connected with India. Under the BRI, for example, the flagship project known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), building pipelines, roads, and railroads from China's Xinjiang province to

Pakistan's Gwadar Port is part of it. This plan not only gives China more straightforward access to the Indian Ocean but also enhances its relationship with Pakistan, a prominent South Asian actor and past adversary of India. China has also used economic diplomacy in Southeast Asia under programs like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework. This LMC framework will increase connectivity and economic cooperation among China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>xii</sup> China's infrastructure projects in these countries have strengthened its presence in the area, occasionally eclipsing old American allies like Thailand and the Philippines. Clearly shown in India's rising participation in regional forums including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (ORA), India has deliberately turned towards a proactive and assertive posture in response to China's increasing influence. These multifaceted platforms have become critical venues for India to create and strengthen relationships with neighbouring countries, serving as both bulwarks against and justification for China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

One prominent avenue India has aggressively used its influence is increasing its involvement within BIMSTEC. This encouraging structure encourages cooperative activities among nations around the Bay of Bengal. India has carefully underlined the need to reduce strong links and promote harmony among member states. The central concept of India's "Neighbourhood First" philosophy drives this determined effort since it tortuously underlines the need to enhance bilateral and multilateral ties with neighbouring nations to guarantee regional stability and stimulate group development. Under neo-realism, the intricate ball between India and China unfolds across the large Indo-Pacific area. This approach explores the complexities of security problems and power dynamics influencing state conduct.

Their interactions are a multifarious embroidery spun with threads of cooperation, competition, and strategic mistrust. They mirror their relentless strategic rivalry in the larger Indo-Pacific domain and are fastened in neo-realism principles. India and China's intricate manoeuvres mirror their unrelenting quest on the geopolitical chessboard of South and Southeast Asia.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Nuclear Deterrence: The India-China Equation in Neo-Realist Lens**

According to neo-realist theory, the threat of nuclear arsenals plays a crucial role in shaping the strategic calculus and deterrence dynamics among nations. India and China possess sophisticated nuclear capabilities that create a delicate balance of power, which is susceptible to the spectre of nuclear escalation during times of crisis or conflict. A cornerstone in preventing both conventional and nuclear provocations from China, India's nuclear policy establishes the foundation for a credible minimum deterrent posture. In this approach, China's nuclear knowledge serves as a beacon of strategic stability, underscoring its potential to discourage rivals from engaging in activities considered detrimental to its interests. Deeply ingrained in the challenges of maintaining a credible deterrent against China, India's nuclear policy embodies a classic neo-realist perspective on security requirements. By adhering to a credible deterrence posture, India aims to foster an environment where the costs of hostility—conventional or nuclear—are prohibitively high for potential adversaries, thereby reinforcing the centrality of power dynamics in determining international relations. Similarly, while China's strategic stability is emphasised, its nuclear policy aligns with the neo-realist paradigm by accentuating the importance of military might to defend national interests and deter potential rivals. Within the neo-realist framework, this complex interaction of nuclear theories between India and China underscores the nuanced balance of power and deterrence dynamics that define their bilateral relationship. It encapsulates the essence of neorealism's focus on power politics and security imperatives as

the primary forces driving state actions on the global stage. As one considers the discussed points, additional data and insights enrich the discourse on the interaction of nuclear theories between India and China from the neo- realist viewpoint. Both nations have recently upgraded and expanded their nuclear arsenals, incorporating developments such as enhanced delivery systems, multiple independently targetable re- entry vehicles (MIRVs), and ballistic missile submarines.

India's historical adherence to a "no-first-use" (NFU) policy contrasts with China's uncertainty over its posture when reflecting various doctrinal orientations and strategic philosophies. To raise their strategic depth and flexibility in the face of conceivable threats, both nations want to have credible nuclear triads with land, sea, and air-based delivery capabilities.

Reflecting different doctrinal approaches and strategic mindsets, India's historical adherence to a "no-first-use" (NFU) policy contrasts with China's ambiguity over its position. Both countries wish to create credible nuclear triads, including land, sea, and air-based delivery capabilities to increase their strategic depth and flexibility in the face of possible threats.

With China acting boldly in the South China Sea, India and China are playing their tactical cards in the Indo-Pacific in the tall-risks game of regional power. China is flexing its muscles and distributing its weight by building islands and establishing military installations in contested areas, aiming to control important sea lines and increase its influence. This disruptive action calls into question India's determination to maintain peace and leadership in the Indian Ocean, considered a vital trade and energy lifeline.<sup>xiv</sup>

Both countries engage in a delicate ballet of diplomacy by attending international conferences and leveraging bilateral ties to advance their objectives. India's active participation in events like the G20 Summit and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) strengthens its diplomatic influence. China's strategic involvement in organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) concurrently enhances its global prestige. Through their calculated moves, India and China aim to establish their positions on the world stage and craft narratives that resonate with audiences near and far.

## Conclusion:

To conclude, the strategic rivalry between India and China in the Indo-Pacific signifies a complex interplay of power, security, and diplomacy. Both countries seek to expand their influence in the region through different approaches. While China aims to enhance its presence through economic and military initiatives, India focuses on strategic alliances and deterrence. It will be intriguing to observe how these two nations maintain their dominance in the region and leverage it for their future progress.

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