

India–China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: A Multi-Level Strategic Assessment

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Article

Purpose—This study examines why the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a critical arena of geopolitical competition between India and China in the 21st century, analyzing the complex dynamics that have transformed this maritime space into a “smokeless battlefield” characterized by economic diplomacy, infrastructure investment, and strategic partnerships rather than direct military confrontation.

Methodology—The study applies David Singer’s three-level analysis framework—system, state, and individual levels—to systematically examine how factors at different analytical levels converge to drive Sino-Indian competition. The analysis integrates structural factors in the international system, state-level capabilities and historical disputes, and the leadership roles of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi.

Finding—The competition results from the convergence of systemic power transitions and globalization processes, state-level border disputes and superpower ambitions, and the nationalist ideologies and assertive leadership styles of both nations’ leaders. No single level adequately explains this phenomenon; rather, the interaction among these levels creates the observed competitive dynamics in the IOR.

Practical Implications—Understanding this multi-level interaction is essential for developing effective competition management strategies, avoiding unwanted escalation, and promoting regional stability in a strategically vital maritime region.

Originality—This study provides the first comprehensive multi-level analysis of Sino-Indian competition in the IOR, demonstrating how Singer’s framework can illuminate

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complex geopolitical competitions and offering a replicable model for analyzing similar international phenomena.

Keywords: China, India, Indian Ocean Region,
international relations, level analysis

I. Introduction

The IOR, a vast maritime region stretching from Australia to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, East Africa and Southern Africa, home to 2.7 billion people, has long emerged as one of the most significant arenas of geopolitical competition in the 21st century.¹ This region is not only a concentration point for maritime trade routes passing through strategic chokepoints such as Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab el-Mandeb, transporting over one-third of global goods and 80% of seaborne oil,² but also serves as a stage for increasingly intense geopolitical competition between two rising Asian powers aspiring to become “superpowers”: India and China. Unlike traditional military confrontations, this competition unfolds primarily through infrastructure investment, economic diplomacy, and the cultivation of strategic partnerships,³ creating a distinctive “smokeless battlefield” characteristic of the globalization era. This competition holds profound significance not only for the two nations involved but also for regional and global order, as India and China are the two most powerful nations in South Asia and East Asia, playing increasingly important roles in global governance.⁴

Although Sino-Indian competition in the IOR has become increasingly pivotal, existing studies still have significant limitations in comprehensively explaining this complex phenomenon. Most research tends to focus on a single aspect of the competition—such as structural factors in the international system,⁵ bilateral border disputes,⁶ or the role of individual leaders⁷—without systematically examining the interaction between factors operating at different levels of analysis. Specifically, realism studies focus on global power structures—the distribution of power among states and the logic of competition in an international system without supreme authority. According to this perspective, “the power shift from West to East”⁸ and “the anarchic nature of the international system inevitably”⁹ create competitive dynamics among major powers. However, these structural theories, while valuable in explaining general trends of power competition, overlook important factors such as: (i) why does the competition between India and China in the IOR occur primarily through economic investment and soft diplomacy rather than direct violent confrontation, as in the disputed Himalayan border region? and (ii) why has the intensity of competition increased significantly over the past decade since Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi came to power compared to their predecessors’ periods? These questions require examination of factors at other analytical levels beyond the systemic level.

Conversely, state-level studies typically emphasize territorial disputes, geopolitical ambitions, and economic interests. These studies provide valuable insights into bilateral dynamics, such as the historical legacy of Sino-Indian border disputes, the Tibet issue, and both nations’ energy security needs.¹⁰ However, they often fail to place these factors in the broader context of systemic transformations in international order, leading to the omission of structural conditions that created a favorable environment for this competition.

For example, while state-level studies can explain why India and China have conflicting interests, they pay less attention to why the post-Cold War power vacuum and globalization processes created specific opportunities and incentives for these two nations to expand their influence at this particular time.

Meanwhile, analyses emphasizing the individual leadership roles of Xi Jinping or Narendra Modi offer important perspectives on how leadership style and personal beliefs shape foreign policy.¹¹ However, these studies often fail to fully connect leadership decisions and styles with the structural pressures at the system level and national interests at the state level that these leaders must confront. Consequently, they tend to “overestimate” the role of individual factors without recognizing that leaders’ choices are always constrained and shaped by structural conditions and national interests. Therefore, the lack of a comprehensive analytical framework has led to a fragmented understanding of the dynamics driving this competition and limited the ability to develop comprehensive policy recommendations.

This study aims to address this knowledge gap by applying David Singer’s level of analysis framework to provide a comprehensive explanation of Sino-Indian competition in the IOR. First developed in 1961, Singer’s level of analysis framework remains one of the most influential analytical tools in international relations scholarship, allowing scholars to systematically examine how factors at different levels—from the structure of the international system to the characteristics and interests of individual states and the beliefs and decisions of leaders—interact to produce international outcomes. Singer’s analytical framework suggests that international political behavior can be understood through examining factors operating at three different levels of analysis. The system level focuses on the structure of the international system and how power distribution among states influences their behavior.¹² The state level examines domestic factors including national capabilities, economic resources, military strength, and internal political dynamics that govern foreign policy decisions.¹³ The individual level analyzes how perceptions, beliefs, and decision-making styles of key leaders shape national strategies and international outcomes.¹⁴

By deploying this framework, the study will systematically analyze this strategic rivalry on these three levels of analysis: (i) the system level, examining how global power structures, globalization processes, and the IOR’s strategic position in the world economic system create favorable conditions for great power competition; (ii) the state level, analyzing how historical border disputes, national development ambitions, and both India and China’s pursuit of “superpower” status drive specific competitive strategies in the region; and (iii) the individual level, exploring how the ideologies, beliefs, and leadership styles of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi shape the nature and intensity of this competition. This study will conclude with a discussion of the interaction and convergence among these three levels along, as well as an assessment of possible future trajectories of the relationship.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a comprehensive and integrated understanding of one of the most important geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century. By demonstrating how factors at three analytical levels converge and mutually reinforce to create the characteristic competitive dynamics, this study not only contributes to international relations theory but also provides important practical insights for policymakers. Understanding this multi-level interaction is essential for developing effective

competition management strategies, avoiding unwanted escalation, and promoting stability in a region of critical strategic importance to global security and prosperity. Moreover, this study's approach can be applied to other geopolitical competitions, providing a model for analyzing complex international phenomena comprehensively and systematically.

II. System Level: Global Power Structure and the Strategic Position of the IOR

At the system level, the competition between India and China in the IOR must be placed in the context of profound structural changes in the international system following the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered the global balance of power, opening a “unipolar” moment with absolute American dominance.¹⁵ However, this structure proved temporary, as the 2008 financial crisis shook the foundations of American capitalism, and the world order witnessed the formation of a multipolar system with China's rapid rise challenging American “hegemony.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, India—the world's largest democracy—positioned itself as a rising power with “responsibility” for global security, particularly in the IOR, which is viewed by the Indian elite as their traditional “backyard.” This argument aligns with Professor Donald Berlin's assessment:

“New Delhi regards the IOR as its backyard and believes ... India will ultimately function as the dominant power in this region. ... According to the expansive view of many Indians, India's security sphere should extend from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and from the African coast to Australia's western shores.”¹⁷

Western powers' withdrawal from the IOR after the Cold War created a significant power vacuum, opening opportunities for rising powers like China and India to expand their competing influence. During the Cold War, the confrontation between the “superpowers” of the Soviet Union and the United States shaped international relations globally, including in the IOR, while significantly limiting the maneuverability of regional powers like India and China in pursuing independent geopolitical strategies.¹⁸ The post-Cold War transition fundamentally changed these structural constraints. As traditional security threats diminished and Western colonialism declined, Western powers reduced their military presence in the IOR due to prohibitively high maintenance costs and the need for defense budget savings in the new era.¹⁹ This relative withdrawal created strategic space that India and China sought to fill, transforming the IOR from a relatively stable region under Western maritime dominance into an arena of increasingly intense power competition.

Beyond power transitions, it is necessary to consider the profound impact of globalization on the nature of great power competition in the 21st century. From a traditional liberal perspective, rapid globalization has deepened interdependence between nations, leading to, for instance, the elevation of international law into an important barrier against “hegemonic” actions by great powers.²⁰ Indeed, this structural transformation has fundamentally changed the mechanisms that rising powers use to expand influence and achieve global status. Historically, Western powers' path to great power status typically included territorial conquest, colonial expansion, and political domination, with military strength

playing the central determinant in geopolitics before the 1980s.²¹ However, the contemporary international system operates under different structural constraints, as the emergence of globalization and the effective constraints of international law have significantly limited the actions of newly rising powers after this period.²² Consequently, the means of achieving “superpower” status have changed to adapt to this new context, with today’s powers primarily intervening in the behavior of smaller states through economic strength and soft power, while the reliance on military force has been reduced.²³ This transformation is crucial for understanding the competition between India and China in the IOR. Rather than engaging in direct military confrontation or territorial invasion, both powers pursue strategies focused on economic investment, infrastructure development, diplomatic cooperation, and cultivating relationships with smaller states in the region, creating a “smokeless battlefield.”

The strategic importance of the IOR in the 21st-century geopolitical system stems from its position as a critical node in the global economic system, rapidly becoming a strategic competition hotspot between two Asian powers. This importance reflects broader systemic shifts in global economic geography and the critical role of maritime trade routes in sustaining national prosperity in the era of globalization. Currently, the IOR has become one of the busiest international maritime trade routes of the 21st century, serving as the hub for sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Annually, over 100,000 vessels and one-third of global goods pass through these waters.²⁴ This concentration of global trade flowing through a relatively limited maritime space creates systemic vulnerabilities and opportunities, shaping great power competition. Additionally, 40% of the world’s offshore oil production comes from the IOR, with 80% of seaborne oil transported through this region.²⁵ In a global system where energy security remains paramount for sustainable economic growth, control over energy routes and supplies is a fundamental element of national power and systemic influence.

Naval strategist Alfred Mahan’s assessment of the IOR’s importance remains valid in the present era. He once asserted that “whoever controls the IOR will dominate Asia, and the IOR is the key to the seven oceans in the 21st century, where the world’s destiny will be determined.”²⁶ This assessment reflects an important systemic reality: in an era of globalized production and trade, maritime dominance in strategically important regions directly translates into broader influence and the ability to shape international outcomes. From another perspective, the competition between India and China in the IOR reflects broader power transfer dynamics in the international system. In the 21st century, the world has witnessed the rapid rise of dynamic economies in the Asia-Pacific region, profoundly impacting the global power structure shaped since the 15th century, with the center of power rapidly shifting from West to East, from Europe to Asia, from the Atlantic-Pacific to the IOR-Pacific.²⁷ This systemic power transfer creates structural pressures driving competitive behavior among rising powers. According to the traditional realism approach, the anarchic nature of the international system, characterized by the absence of a supreme authority capable of enforcing rules and protecting states, compels states to pursue self-help strategies to ensure survival and advance their interests.²⁸ Rising states tend to define their interests more broadly as their power increases, and major shifts in the balance of power often create opportunities while sometimes increasing incentives for preventive war.²⁹ This systemic requirement is clearly manifested in offensive realism theory, most prominently

advanced by John Mearsheimer, who argued that “great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony immediately, to eliminate any possibility of being challenged by another great power, and only an unwise state would miss the opportunity to become hegemonic in the system.”³⁰ This systemic logic helps explain why both India and China are intensifying competition in the IOR despite the enormous costs and risks they face.

In summary, system-level analysis shows that Sino-Indian competition in the IOR is not merely bilateral competition but reflects fundamental structural changes in global power distribution. The post-Cold War power vacuum, the transformation of power competition mechanisms in the context of globalization, the IOR’s central strategic position in the global economic system, and the broader dynamics of power transfer from West to East all create systemic pressures driving both India and China to compete for influence in this important maritime region. Understanding these systemic impacts is essential for explaining why the IOR has emerged as a major stage of great power competition in the 21st century, while providing the foundation for analyzing state and individual-level dynamics to be explored in subsequent sections.

III. State Level: Border Disputes and “Superpower” Ambitions

At the state level, the competition between India and China in the IOR is profoundly influenced by historical border disputes and unresolved territorial conflicts, which have created deep suspicion and strategic concerns in both nations. The Tibet issue occupies a central position in this historical legacy, serving both as a crucial geographical buffer and as the source of persistent tension between the two Asian powers.³¹ Since the 19th century, Tibet has been part of the geopolitical conflict between the British Empire and the Russian Empire in the “Great Game,” when the British Empire annexed Tibet in 1903 to establish a buffer zone separating the Russian Empire and China from colonial India. This colonial-era arrangement transformed Tibet into a strategic buffer, mediating relations among regional powers. In 1914, the McMahon Line, delineated in the Simla Convention by the British Empire to demarcate the Tibet region’s borders, was accepted by India but not signed by China as they considered it an “act of territorial aggression” and “without legal validity.”³² Consequently, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China under Mao Zedong’s leadership conducted a campaign to incorporate Tibet under its control from 1951 through the “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” campaign.

This fundamental change in territorial control eliminated the previous geographical separation between the two regional powers of South Asia and East Asia, bringing them into territorial proximity and creating new sources of strategic conflict. Tibet’s strategic importance extends beyond territorial control to encompass broader aspects. For China, Tibet’s strategic position plays a pivotal role in its East–West Corridor geopolitical ambitions, historically known as the “Silk Road” during China’s Han dynasty, while also intimately connected to its security concerns at the border with South Asia.³³ From China’s perspective, Tibet is an integral part of territorial integrity and the nation’s strategic depth, serving as the western frontier that must be defended against external threats and

separatist movements.³⁴ China's strategic vision of Tibet and the surrounding Himalayan region is encapsulated in Mao Zedong's "Palm and Five Fingers" strategy from the 1950s, whereby Tibet is likened to the palm, while Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh in the Himalayan region are the five fingers.³⁵ This strategic doctrine reflects China's intent to consolidate control over Tibet while expanding influence to adjacent Himalayan territories, effectively implementing what Indian leadership believes to be a "strategy to encircle India."³⁶

The 1962 Sino-Indian border war was a critical turning point that exacerbated territorial disputes and created patterns of suspicion lasting to this day. At that time, taking advantage of the opportunity when the two "superpowers" were focused on confronting each other during the Cuban Missile Crisis, China launched a bloody conflict at the India-China border,³⁷ terminating the Panchsheel Agreement and creating a knot in the contradictory relationship persisting to this day between the two Asian powers. The conflict caused significant casualties with 3,128 soldiers killed, over 3,100 captured, 1,400–1,600 wounded, and territorial losses for India.³⁸ This battle left a lasting psychological impact on India's strategic thinking and national security policy, with Defense Minister Krishna Menon forced to resign for "underestimating" China. Into the 21st century, border tensions have continued and escalated periodically with serious events, such as the Galwan Valley clash in December 2020, which resulted in at least 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese soldiers killed.³⁹ In 2021, China began constructing military bases and passed a decision to build 624 border villages in the Himalayan region.⁴⁰ In May 2025, China announced a list of "standard names" for dozens of place names in the disputed territory currently controlled by India, including 15 mountains, five residential areas, four mountain passes, two rivers, and one lake.⁴¹ Recent events show that border disputes remain a hot issue capable of causing violent confrontations and escalating bilateral tensions.

However, geographical factors impose significant constraints on the possibility of large-scale military conflict along the land border. International relations researchers have assessed that "the Himalayan range has become a natural barrier" separating the world's two oldest civilizations.⁴² This assessment helps us understand that the treacherous terrain of the 8,849-meter-high Himalayan mountains creates natural obstacles for sustained military operations, effectively limiting the scope and intensity of border conflicts. These geographical constraints have important strategic significance, as geographical factors have become important deterrents to comprehensive conflict between India and China in the border region.⁴³ Although the border remains a source of frequent tension and violence, the impracticality of large-scale warfare in the Himalayan region has contributed to redirecting competitive energy to other strategic domains, most notably the IOR. The connection between border disputes and IOR competition is clearly manifested in contemporary strategic analysis, as the competition between India and China in the IOR partly aims to achieve power balance and create leverage to protect national interests in Tibet and the border region. Specifically, through activities in the IOR, China seeks to pressure India to accept the "status quo" regarding Tibet, while India hopes to leverage its strength in the IOR to assert its voice on border and Tibet issues.⁴⁴ This strategic logic shows that state-level factors, specifically unresolved territorial disputes and the search for strategic leverage, drive competition in seemingly distant maritime domains. Border conflicts and the Tibet issue are not merely historical grievances but active factors shaping contemporary

strategic behavior. Unable to definitively resolve these issues through direct confrontation along the land border, both nations have sought alternative arenas where they can demonstrate strength, accumulate bargaining leverage, and potentially alter the overall balance of power in bilateral relations.

Beyond border disputes, state-level analysis must account for the developmental trajectories and “superpower” ambitions of both India and China as rising powers. The rise of these two powers has created energy, resource, and market deficits for their rapid economic growth, creating competitive pressures as both nations seek to access energy supplies, raw materials, and export markets necessary to sustain economic development and domestic political stability.⁴⁵ The IOR, with its role as a critical bridge for global trade and as a region rich in natural resources, naturally becomes the focal point of competition between these resource-hungry rising powers. The ambition to achieve “superpower” status is a fundamental driver of competitive behavior at the state level. Analysts assess that “India and China will become the new superpowers” of the 21st century,⁴⁶ creating a need for these two nations to expand their influence and leading to intense geopolitical competition in Sino-Indian relations in the IOR. The pursuit of great power status is not merely symbolic but reflects practical calculations about national security, economic prosperity, and the ability to shape international outcomes in ways favorable to national interests.

However, the path to achieving “superpower” status in the modern era differs significantly from historical precedents. In the 21st century, due to the emergence of globalization and the increasing influence of international law, traditional power expansion methods employed by rising powers in previous eras are no longer effective; instead, power expansion has shifted to methods more compatible with the contemporary global context, emphasizing the use of economic strength and soft power to intervene in the internal affairs of smaller states.⁴⁷ Despite their economic dynamism, both India and China face challenges in converting economic strength into comprehensive global influence. Lamont argues that the rise of India and China differs from the historical trajectory of previous “superpowers,” as their rise is primarily driven by economic strength, while their military power remains relatively weak, especially in advanced military technology.⁴⁸ This capability gap creates incentives for both nations to enhance their military power projection capabilities, particularly in strategically important regions like the IOR, where maritime power represents a critical component of global influence.

The importance of maritime power in achieving “superpower” status has deep roots in strategic thinking, when Admiral Sir Walter Raleigh in the 17th century hypothesized that “whoever masters the sea will control trade, and whoever masters world trade will rule the world’s wealth and thereby master the entire world.”⁴⁹ In the 19th century, absorbing Raleigh’s insights, Mahan reinterpreted that “whoever controls the chokepoints at sea will control maritime transport, and whoever controls maritime transport will control the world.”⁵⁰ From this, his perspective laid the foundation for sea power theory and significantly influenced the successful rise of the United States in the 20th century, while continuing to influence the maritime strategies of contemporary powers, including India and China. This maritime strategic requirement is particularly important for China, a nation whose economic development model heavily depends on secure access to global markets and energy supplies. The miraculous development of the economy has created urgent requirements for energy security and maritime security in the IOR, where 80% of China’s

oil and 66% of LNG imports must pass through the Strait of Malacca.⁵¹ Thus, it can be said that China's economic lifeline runs through maritime chokepoints in the IOR, creating an "Achilles' heel" that must be addressed through developing naval capabilities and cultivating friendly relations with coastal states.

China's strategic response to these vulnerabilities has manifested in various forms. China deployed its "offshore defense" strategy beginning in 1985 aimed at minimizing security risks and enhancing the ability to impact these critical maritime trade corridors.⁵² As part of this strategy, India believes that "China has initiated the String of Pearls through the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, aimed at establishing a network of commercial, military bases, and ports throughout the IOR,"⁵³ although China has never acknowledged this. The BRI represents China's most ambitious effort to reshape the geopolitical landscape of the IOR and the wider world. The scale and scope of the BRI are unprecedented in world history, with 152 countries participating, signing more than 200 documents and cooperation agreements, directly affecting approximately two-thirds of the world's population and accounting for about 40% of global GDP.⁵⁴ This massive infrastructure investment program has significantly increased China's influence throughout the IOR and beyond, creating networks of economic dependence and strategic cooperation that advance China's interests. China's use of economic leverage through the BRI to secure strategic access is particularly evident in port development projects. China has achieved several important objectives in the IOR, including Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu Port (Myanmar), Gwadar Port (Pakistan), Chittagong Port (Bangladesh), Colombo Port (Sri Lanka), and a naval base in Djibouti.⁵⁵ Currently controlling/having major influence at these ports provides China with a strategic foothold in the heart of the IOR, allowing both commercial operations and potential military applications, helping enhance China's power projection capabilities.

Strategic partnerships have further expanded China's influence in the region, as current geopolitical moves show Pakistan is considered by China as a strategic ally in the "strategy to encircle India."⁵⁶ In the 21st century, China and Pakistan have maintained a close strategic partnership, driven by China's support for Pakistan's nuclear development program in the previous century and the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project signed in 2013.⁵⁷ This project provides China with overland access to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan's Gwadar Port, bypassing the vulnerable Strait of Malacca and reducing China's strategic dependence on sea routes passing through areas under Indian influence. The strategic importance of the China-Pakistan relationship extends to energy security, as China's investment in Gwadar Port provides an alternative transport route to the Strait of Malacca, called the "Malacca Dilemma" by former Chinese leader Hu Jintao.⁵⁸

China's increasingly expanding presence has caused significant strategic concerns in India, as the BRI challenge has severely impacted India's core interests, with projects including a series of overland-to-ocean transportation routes forming an arc surrounding Indian territory and affecting India's traditional position in the IOR.⁵⁹ From India's perspective, China's infrastructure investments and strategic partnerships in South Asia and the broader IOR represent an encirclement strategy designed to limit India's power and influence. India's strategic response has emphasized both regional engagement and extra-regional partnerships. In the 21st century, India's maritime and commercial security is closely linked to strategic straits in Southeast Asia—such as Lombok, Sunda, and especially the Strait of Malacca—through which roughly 92–95 percent of global seaborne trade passes, and of which India accounts

for about 55 percent.⁶⁰ Consequently, Indian leadership has deployed the Look East Policy in 1991, later developed into the Act East Policy in 2014, aimed at consolidating India’s economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries, countering China’s influence, and protecting India’s interests in the East Sea region.⁶¹

India has also invested in developing naval capabilities and building a more assertive maritime strategy. This is reflected in India’s 2004 Maritime Doctrine, the 2009 Maritime Doctrine, and the 2015 Indian Maritime Military Strategy, which all focus on effective strike capabilities and inflicting significant damage on potential adversaries, as well as enhancing naval combat capabilities and the scope of patrol and operations in the IOR. These doctrines reflect India’s determination to assert its position as the leading maritime power in the IOR and to develop capabilities that can deter or defeat potential adversaries. In line with this strategic vision, Raasheed has noted that India has progressively modernized its naval arsenal, exemplified by India’s achievement of consolidating its nuclear triad in 2016 when India commissioned the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, the *INS Arihant*, into the Indian Navy. He further notes that as of 2025, “in addition to *INS Arihant*, New Delhi’s sea-based nuclear deterrent also includes the *INS Arighat* which was inducted into the Indian Navy in 2024...”⁶² However, in terms of overall naval strength, China currently has superior capabilities over India (see Table 1). The figures show a clear gap between the two navies. China, with 754 warships compared to India’s 293, demonstrates that China’s naval modernization has been both rapid and comprehensive, especially in main strike platforms: China’s submarine fleet is 3.4 times greater than India’s and its destroyer and frigate fleets are nearly four times greater. Particularly notable is China’s heavy investment in anti-submarine warfare capabilities with 36 mine warfare vessels, while India completely lacks this. However, India maintains flexible combat capabilities with two aircraft carriers, reflecting its defensive orientation in the IOR. The fleet size disparity stems not only from defense budgets (China’s is 3.6 times larger) but also from different strategies: China aims for global maritime dominance, while India focuses on protecting vital maritime zones.

Table 1: Comparison of India–China Naval Strength (2025)

Warship Type	India	China	Notes
Total fleet strength	293 (rank 6)	754 (rank 1)	China superior by 2.6 times
Aircraft carriers	2 (rank 3)	3 (rank 2)	China has 1 more ship
Helicopter carriers	0 (rank 145)	4 (rank 2)	India has no such vessels
Submarines	18 (rank 7)	61 (rank 3)	China 3.4 times greater
Destroyers	13 (rank 4)	50 (rank 2)	China 3.8 times greater
Frigates	14 (rank 4)	47 (rank 1)	China 3.4 times greater
Corvettes	18 (rank 5)	72 (rank 2)	China 4 times greater
Patrol vessels	135 (rank 8)	150 (rank 5)	China has 15 more ships
Mine warfare vessels	0 (rank 145)	36 (rank 2)	India has no such vessels

Sources: Authors compiled from *Global Firepower*⁶³

Fortunately, the strategic geographical position of the IOR provides India with significant structural advantages, partially compensating for China's naval strength, economic investments, and diplomacy. The geopolitical competitive relationship between India and China in the 21st-century IOR stems from India's strategic geographical position, allowing the nation to control critical global maritime trade routes in this region. Chinese merchant vessels must pass through chokepoints in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, which are under India's control, before reaching the Strait of Malacca.⁶⁴ This geographical reality provides India with potential leverage over China's commercial interests, creating a form of strategic symmetry with China's control over Tibet. India has sought to leverage this geographical advantage through regional partnerships and extra-regional linkages. In this context, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, including India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as a critical strategic initiative for India to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁵ This mechanism provides India with a crucial multilateral platform to enhance maritime capabilities, consolidate regional alliances, and cooperate on issues of common concern, strengthening India's relative position and providing diplomatic and potentially military support to balance China's influence.

In summary, state-level analysis shows that national capabilities, historical grievances, and developmental ambitions together drive Sino-Indian competition in the IOR. Border disputes create persistent suspicion and strategic concerns, while the pursuit of "superpower" status drives both nations to expand influence in strategically important regions. These state-level factors interact with systemic pressures to create the competitive dynamics observed in the IOR, where both rising powers seek to advance interests, enhance security, and accumulate the capabilities and influence necessary to achieve their global ambitions.

IV. Individual Level: The Leadership Roles of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi

At the individual level of analysis, the vision, beliefs, and decision-making styles of key leaders play a pivotal role in shaping national strategies and driving competitive dynamics in the IOR. The leadership role of Chinese President Xi Jinping is a particularly important factor, as his personal vision of national rejuvenation and assertive approach to foreign policy have significantly enhanced China's engagement in the IOR and deepened competitive dynamics with India. Xi Jinping's strategic worldview is fundamentally shaped by a narrative of historical grievances and national restoration.⁶⁶ Upon assuming power in 2012, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the Chinese Dream, envisioning the restoration of China's historical position as a leading "superpower." This vision clearly links contemporary Chinese foreign policy with the narrative of past humiliation during the Century of Humiliation, approximately from 1839 to 1949, when Western powers and Japan dominated China.⁶⁷ The Chinese Dream embodies Xi Jinping's personal commitment to restoring China's power, dignity, and influence on the international stage, an objective that inevitably includes expanding China's presence and influence in strategically important regions like the IOR.

Xi Jinping's approach to territorial and border issues reflects his firm stance on sovereignty and national integrity matters. Speaking about the goal of building Tibet into a

western border fortress to realize the geopolitical ambitions of the Chinese Dream, President Xi Jinping emphasized at the National People's Congress meeting on May 22, 2020, that "China must build a modern, united, prosperous, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful socialist society in Tibet, uniting ethnic groups and educating the masses in the struggle against separatism."⁶⁸ This statement shows Xi Jinping's personal belief that Tibet is not merely a territory but a strategic foundation of Chinese national security and a testing ground for the broader national rejuvenation project. Xi Jinping's assertiveness on territorial issues has led to more confrontational policies along the India-China border. Under his leadership, China has adopted a harder line stance in disputed border areas, evidenced by multiple incidents including the 2017 Doklam standoff and the deadly 2020 Galwan Valley clash.⁶⁹ These confrontations reflect Xi Jinping's willingness to accept escalating tensions and even limited military conflict to pursue strategic objectives, demonstrating a risk tolerance markedly different from his predecessors' more cautious approach to border management.

Chakma argues that Xi Jinping's personal commitments to the BRI are perhaps the clearest manifestation of his individual impact on China's IOR strategy.⁷⁰ Xi Jinping has elevated the BRI into a core pillar of Chinese foreign policy and clearly linked it with his personal legacy.⁷¹ The BRI embodies Xi Jinping's vision of China-led regional integration, with China at the center of economic networks spanning from East Asia to Europe and Africa. The initiative's massive scale reflects Xi Jinping's ambitious vision and his willingness to invest over \$150 billion from the BRI (with Pakistan accounting for the largest share) to reshape the geopolitical landscape of this region. Xi Jinping's approach to the BRI in the IOR demonstrates his strategic calculations toward India. Rather than accommodating India's sensitivities about China's encroachment into what India considers its sphere of influence, Xi Jinping has expanded China's political and economic influence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—precisely the nations whose relationships with China cause maximum strategic concern in New Delhi.⁷² This pattern suggests Xi Jinping's belief that China's growing strength allows it to expand influence despite Indian opposition, and that India must ultimately adapt to China's influence in the region.

The concept of "striving for achievement" has shaped Xi Jinping's overall approach to foreign policy, replacing Deng Xiaoping's more cautious doctrine of "hide your strength and bide your time." This shift reflects Xi Jinping's personal belief that China has accumulated sufficient strength to assert its interests more directly, and that the international strategic environment, particularly the relative decline of the United States and its preoccupation with other challenges, presents opportunities for China to expand influence that must be seized.⁷³ This worldview has contributed to China's more assertive behavior across multiple domains, including the IOR, where China has intensified naval deployments, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic cooperation. Xi Jinping's personal circumstances and political trajectory have shaped his nationalist beliefs and assertive leadership style. Having witnessed the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in his youth and subsequently risen through provincial leadership positions before assuming national leadership, Xi Jinping has built a worldview emphasizing strong centralized power, national unity, and the restoration of Chinese power.⁷⁴ These personal experiences during a period of Chinese weakness and internal instability appear to have reinforced his determination to

prevent any recurrence of national humiliation or strategic weakness, objectives requiring the expansion of China's power and influence globally, including in the IOR.⁷⁵

The concentration of decision-making power under Xi Jinping's leadership has amplified the impact of his personal views on Chinese policy. Unlike the more collective leadership model characteristic of earlier periods in post-Mao Chinese politics, Xi Jinping has concentrated power in his own hands to an unprecedented degree, abolishing term limits and asserting himself as China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong.⁷⁶ This power concentration means that Xi Jinping's personal strategic vision, risk calculations, and policy priorities are more directly translated into actual policy outcomes, with fewer institutional constraints or checks from other power centers within the Chinese system. Xi Jinping's approach to maritime power reflects his personal belief in its importance for achieving great power status. His emphasis on "building China into a maritime power" and personal attention to naval modernization demonstrate his belief that control of sea routes and development of blue-water naval capabilities are essential prerequisites for China to rise to comprehensive "superpower" status.⁷⁷ This belief has driven massive investments in naval capabilities and maritime infrastructure in the IOR, as Xi Jinping seeks to establish the foundation for China's sustainable naval presence in distant waters.

Personal relationships, or the lack thereof, between Xi Jinping and Indian leadership also influence bilateral dynamics. Unlike some earlier periods when personal relationships between Chinese and Indian leaders helped manage tensions, the Xi Jinping era has been characterized by limited personal bonding and increasing mutual suspicion. Xi Jinping's periodic meetings with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite being proclaimed "successful" by both nations' media, have actually produced very few breakthroughs on core disputes. Xi Jinping's apparent unwillingness to make significant concessions on border demarcation issues suggests he calculates that time and relative power trajectories favor China's position.⁷⁸ Xi Jinping's vision of China's role in global governance further shapes Beijing's approach to the IOR. He envisions China not merely as a participant in the existing international order but as a "shaper of new institutions and norms" reflecting Chinese interests and values.⁷⁹ Initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the emphasis on win-win cooperation in the BRI reflect Xi Jinping's belief that "China should offer alternative development and governance models to those dominated by Western nations."⁸⁰ In the IOR, this is manifested through efforts to establish China as a leading economic partner and political influence, effectively replacing both Western powers and regional actors like India.

The leadership role of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi represents an equally important individual factor shaping the competition between India and China in the IOR. Modi's Hindu nationalist ideology, his assertive approach to national security, and his vision of India as a leading power have significantly influenced India's strategy in the region and intensified competitive dynamics with China. Modi's worldview is fundamentally shaped by his connection to Hindu nationalism and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh organization, the ideological parent organization of his Bharatiya Janata Party.⁸¹ This ideological foundation shapes his understanding of Indian identity, national interests, and India's rightful place in regional and global order. Hindu nationalist ideology emphasizes "the greatness of Indian civilization," historical grievances against foreign domination, and the urgent need to "restore India to a position of power and influence commensurate with

its ancient glory.”⁸² This narrative creates natural tensions with China, a nation that Hindu nationalists view as a hostile power seeking to contain and encircle India.

Modi’s personal experience as chief minister of Gujarat before becoming prime minister has shaped his approach to governance and foreign policy. His reputation for decisive action, development-oriented governance, and willingness to make “bold decisions” has created his political brand and shaped his approach to national leadership. After becoming prime minister in 2014, Modi brought this assertive leadership style to India’s foreign policy, pursuing more assertive strategies in the IOR and adopting a “tougher” stance toward China than some predecessors. Modi’s transformation of India’s Look East Policy into the Act East Policy reflects his personal belief that “India must move beyond cautious diplomatic engagement toward active strategic participation in Southeast Asia.”⁸³ This terminological shift from Act East Policy is not merely semantic but reflects Modi’s belief that India must convert potential power into actual influence through concrete actions, investments, and strategic partnerships.⁸⁴ Under Modi’s leadership, India has significantly expanded relations with Southeast Asian nations, increased naval deployments, and deepened security cooperation with key regional actors, particularly Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Modi’s approach to China combines economic pragmatism with security assertiveness. While recognizing the importance of economic cooperation and supporting a multipolar order through BRICS with China, Modi has demonstrated a willingness to confront China on security issues and accept the economic and diplomatic costs of such confrontation. This balancing act reflects Modi’s calculation that “India cannot appear weak in the face of Chinese pressure,” even as India seeks to maintain economic relations beneficial to India’s development.⁸⁵ Personal relationships or the lack thereof between Modi and Xi Jinping have influenced bilateral dynamics. Despite multiple summit meetings, including informal summits designed to build personal relationships, the Modi–Xi Jinping relationship has yet to achieve any significant progress on core disputes. The contrast between the warm atmosphere of some summit meetings and ongoing ground tensions, including deadly border clashes, suggests fundamental disagreements on strategic objectives or the powerlessness of personal diplomacy to overcome structural competitive pressures.

Modi’s response to the 2020 Galwan Valley clash demonstrated his approach to managing tensions with China. Rather than seeking immediate de-escalation at any cost, Modi allowed India to respond firmly, including military reinforcement along the border and diplomatic condemnation of Chinese actions. His public statement that “For us, the unity and sovereignty of the nation are most important. India desires peace, but when provoked, we have the capability to respond appropriately”⁸⁶ shows how personal political imperatives and Modi’s leadership style influence India’s crisis management approach with China. Modi’s support for QUAD is an important strategic choice formed based on his personal assessment of India’s security needs and the effectiveness of multilateral balancing with China. Previous Indian governments had been cautious about mechanisms that could be seen as containing China, fearing Chinese retaliation, while Modi has made QUAD central to India’s strategy, calculating that the benefits of enhanced cooperation with like-minded democracies outweigh the risks of antagonizing China.⁸⁷ This decision reflects Modi’s personal belief that India’s security requires active cooperation with other powers concerned about China’s assertiveness.

The “Neighborhood First” policy emerged in 2008, but it was only driven by Modi in 2014, showing his attention to India’s relationships with smaller nations in South Asia and the IOR, reflecting his understanding of China’s encirclement strategy and determination to counter it.⁸⁸ Under Modi’s leadership, India has intensified diplomatic cooperation, economic assistance, and security cooperation with nations such as the Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka—precisely the nations where China’s influence has grown strongly through BRI investments. As noted by Shivamurthy, India has undertaken numerous connectivity and development projects in its neighborhood:

“India has initiated over 100 projects with Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar on port connectivity via road, rail, air, and sea routes. India has provided lines of credit worth \$2.8 billion to Bangladesh, \$1.3 billion to Nepal, \$1.7 billion to Sri Lanka, and \$80 million to the Maldives. By 2023, the value of these credit lines has increased to \$7.9 billion for Bangladesh, \$1.6 billion for Nepal, \$2.7 billion for Sri Lanka, and \$1.4 billion for the Maldives.”⁸⁹

Modi’s personal engagement in cultivating relationships with leaders of these small nations, including state visits and aid packages, shows his awareness of the strategic benefits involved in the competition for influence with IOR coastal states. Particularly, Modi’s emphasis on the 2015 SAGAR initiative and its development into MAHASAGAR in March 2025 as India’s vision for the IOR reflects his effort to offer an alternative to China’s BRI, one emphasizing India’s leadership, regional cooperation, and respect for sovereignty.⁹⁰ This initiative demonstrates Modi’s belief that India must not merely react to Chinese initiatives but must present its own vision of regional order and deliver practical benefits to smaller nations to effectively compete with China’s economic incentives. Modi’s vision of India’s role in the global order shapes his approach to competition in the IOR. He envisions India not as a secondary power “accommodating” China’s influence, but as “a leading power capable of shaping regional order and contributing to global governance.”⁹¹ This ambitious vision requires demonstrating India’s power and influence in India’s immediate periphery, precisely the IOR, where any perception of Chinese dominance would fundamentally undermine Modi’s broader narrative about India’s rise.

The domestic political aspect cannot be ignored in Modi’s approach to China. As a leader with a political brand emphasizing strength, assertiveness, and nationalist spirit, Modi faces “domestic political pressure demanding a show of toughness toward China,” especially after incidents like the 2020 Galwan clash that sparked outrage among the Indian people.⁹² For example, Congress Party President Mallikarjun Kharge wrote on Twitter: “The Modi Government is responsible for failing to maintain the status quo at the Line of Actual Control. We have lost control of 26 out of 65 patrol points. We have tried to raise this issue multiple times in Parliament, but the Modi Government wants to hide information from the Indian people.”⁹³ Kharge’s criticism illustrates the intensity of domestic scrutiny and potentially constraining his flexibility in managing bilateral tensions.

In summary, the vision, beliefs, and leadership styles of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi have driven Sino-Indian competition in the IOR. Both embrace nationalism, emphasize great power status, and implement more assertive foreign policies than their predecessors. Power concentration allows personal views to be directly translated into policy. This interaction creates competitive dynamics characterized by suspicion, limited compromise, and escalating tensions. Xi Jinping’s belief in expanding Chinese influence over the

IOR confronts Modi's determination to maintain India's dominant position in its "natural sphere of influence." Additionally, Xi Jinping's infrastructure investments and strategic relations in South Asia challenge India's regional leadership role, while Modi's support for QUAD and US-India relations opposes Xi Jinping's vision of an Asia-centric order with China at the center.

V. Discussion

Applying David Singer's level of analysis framework demonstrates that the competition between India and China in the IOR is the result of complex interactions of factors operating at the system, state, and individual levels. No single level can fully explain this; rather, it is the convergence and mutual reinforcement of factors at all three levels that creates the competitive dynamics observed in the region. At the system level, the post-Cold War power vacuum in the IOR; the structural transformation of power competition mechanisms in the context of globalization; the region's central strategic position in the global economy; and the broader dynamics of power shift from West to East create favorable conditions and structural incentives driving great power competition. These systemic factors establish the structural context in which India and China operate, creating both opportunities and incentives to expand influence in the IOR. At the state level, historical border disputes and the Tibet issue, developmental requirements and resource needs, along with ambitions to achieve "superpower" status create specific national interests and strategic objectives driving competitive behavior. These state-level factors transform systemic pressures into concrete policy priorities and strategic initiatives, as both nations seek to advance interests, enhance security, and accumulate capabilities necessary for great power status. At the individual level, the nationalist ideologies, personal beliefs, and assertive leadership styles of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi amplify competitive dynamics and reduce prospects for compromise or accommodation.⁹⁴ These individual-level factors determine how systemic pressures and national interests are interpreted, how strategies are constructed and implemented, and what level of risk and confrontation is considered "acceptable" in pursuing national objectives.

The interaction among levels creates emergent dynamics that cannot be reduced to any single level of analysis. For example, while systemic power transitions create general pressures for increasing power competition, the intensity and confrontational nature of the competition in the IOR cannot be explained without understanding state-level factors, including resource dependence and developmental needs, as well as individual leadership choices. Similarly, while border disputes create persistent tensions at the state level, whether these tensions lead to military conflict or diplomatic management depends on systemic constraints such as international law and global economic interdependence as well as individual leadership decisions about risk tolerance and crisis management. This framework also illuminates potential pathways for both escalation and de-escalation. Escalation risks emerge when factors at all three levels converge toward promoting confrontation, for instance when systemic power transitions create zero-sum competitive pressures, state-level disputes over vital interests resist compromise, and individual leaders pursue assertive strategies accepting high risks. De-escalation possibilities emerge when factors at

different levels create countervailing pressures, such as when systemic economic interdependence creates costs for conflict, state recognition of mutual vulnerabilities encourages cooperation, and individual leaders prioritize stability over nationalist assertion.⁹⁵

Understanding Sino-Indian competition through this multi-level framework has important implications for policy responses. Efforts to manage competition must address factors at all three levels. At the system level, strengthening international institutions and norms to constrain aggressive behavior can help redirect competition toward less dangerous forms. At the state level, developing mechanisms to manage specific disputes including border negotiations, water-sharing agreements, and confidence-building measures can reduce immediate sources of tension. As former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran emphasized, “although unable to resolve core disputes, these mechanisms have helped prevent escalation and maintain stability.”⁹⁶ At the individual level, promoting dialogue among leaders, building personal relationships, and creating domestic political space for compromise can reduce the personal aspects of competition.

In summary, Sino-Indian competition in the IOR is likely to continue as a prominent feature of 21st-century geopolitics, as systemic power transitions will continue to create competitive pressures, territorial and resource disputes will resist resolution, and leaders facing external and domestic pressures will persist in pursuing assertive strategies to project strength and advance national interests. However, the multi-level framework also suggests competition need not necessarily escalate into armed conflict, as countervailing factors at multiple levels, including economic interdependence, geographical constraints on military operations, international legal constraints, and the catastrophic costs of war between nuclear-armed states, create powerful dynamics for managing competition below the threshold of direct military confrontation. The challenge for policymakers and scholars is to strengthen these constraining factors while addressing the fundamental sources of competition, recognizing that sustainable management of this competition requires attention to systemic structures, national interests, and individual leadership dynamics, toward a future where two Asian powers can coexist and develop without threatening regional and global peace and stability.

VI. Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated the value of applying David Singer’s level of analysis framework to understand the complex competition between India and China in the IOR. By systematically examining factors at the system, state, and individual levels, the study has achieved a comprehensive understanding of how structural forces, national interests, and leadership decisions converge to create the competitive dynamics characteristic of this critical geopolitical competition.

System-level analysis revealed that the post-Cold War power vacuum, the transformation of power competition mechanisms in the context of globalization, the IOR’s central strategic position in the global economy, and the dynamics of power transfer from West to East created the structural context driving power competition in the region. State-level analysis illuminated how historical legacies including border disputes and the Tibet issue, developmental requirements and ambitions to achieve “superpower” status create specific

national interests and strategic objectives driving competitive behavior. Individual-level analysis demonstrated that the nationalist ideologies, personal beliefs, and assertive leadership styles of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi have amplified competitive dynamics and shaped the specific nature of the competition.

Most importantly, the analysis showed how factors at these three levels interact and mutually reinforce to create the observed competitive dynamics. Sino-Indian competition in the IOR cannot be fully understood by examining any single level in isolation; rather, it is the convergence of systemic power transitions, state-level disputes and ambitions, and individual leadership choices that together drive this geopolitical competition. For scholars, the study demonstrates the necessity of multi-level analysis to understand complex international phenomena. For policymakers, the analysis shows that effective management of competition requires strategies addressing factors at all three levels, including strengthening systemic constraints, developing state-level dispute management mechanisms, and promoting leadership dialogue.

Looking forward, Sino-Indian competition in the IOR will likely continue as a prominent feature of 21st-century international relations. Systemic power transitions remain ongoing, state-level disputes are unlikely to be easily resolved, and individual leaders will continue pursuing strategies that demonstrate strength and advance national interests. However, the multi-level framework also provides a basis for cautious optimism, as countervailing factors at multiple levels including economic interdependence, geographical constraints, international legal constraints, and the catastrophic costs of war between nuclear-armed powers create powerful dynamics for restraint. Ultimately, Sino-Indian competition in the IOR is a test of how rising powers in the 21st century will manage competitive relationships in an era of unprecedented interdependence. Understanding this competition through a comprehensive multi-level analytical framework is the essential first step toward developing strategies that can navigate these challenges and chart a path toward sustainable coexistence between two of the world's most influential rising powers.

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