

Status competition or Conflict of interest: Understanding China-India Asymmetrical rivalry in the Indian Ocean region

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Abstract

Status competition in world politics always played a greater role, especially the developing powers who strive for greater status in world politics, and so do both India and China. This article tries to examine the nature of the conflict between India and China through the framework of Status competition while at the same time comparatively examining it with other conflict models such as Conflict of interest, Zero-sum game, and Status Dilemma. The article demonstrates that India-China relations in general and in the IOR (Indian Ocean region) should not always be scrutinized through the zero-sum game concept. The status competition model differs from other conflict models in many ways. The status competition model can accommodate the asymmetrical power gap between India and China in IOR. Also, the model provides policymakers in Beijing and New Delhi to avoid conflict-ridden zero-sum game thinking.

Keywords: Indian Ocean region, Conflict, Status-competition, Cooperation, India-China relations, Zero-sum game, Asymmetric.

Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a lot of drastic changes around the world. Power politics is again back in the picture so do the assertiveness of developing powers, India and China are no exception. Asia's powerhouses took a sharp turn in their history when Xi was selected as general secretary of CCP in China and India elected Modi as Prime Minister. The formal and informal meetings between 2015 and 2017 created a bonhomie between the two paramount leaders of India and China. Although high-level engagements deliver enhanced economic engagements, investments and tradeoffs, they failed to reach a point where both India and China can negotiate the stark differences of territorial disputes, LAC demarcation, and the

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South China sea issue (Smith 2013). The failure of this high-level engagement yielded Doklam in 2017, and the first fatality since 1975 on the India-China border when the two militaries had a clash in 2020 (Singh 2021). The incident of 2020 is marked as the lowest point in India-China relations since 1962 (Pu 2022). 2020 clashes in Galwan valley have turned India-China relations into doldrums and turned out to be a watershed moment in both nations' history (Gokhale 2021).

The question that arises here is why both India and China are engaged in confrontational behaviour where both aspire to achieve higher status in the international order (Nayar and Paul 2003) and events like these can seriously hamper their objective ambitions. The past decades have clearly shown the world that rising China and India are a good thing not just for Asia but for the whole world (Acharya 2008). The development story of Asian giants has motivated nations around the globe yet the scholar community is focused on the rivalry between the two Asian giants (Paul 2018:4). Yet despite having border issues, water sharing issue, Strategic contention and ideological differences, India and China worked together on multiple fora to accommodate each other's status this is drawing the attention of scholars towards a status scholarship which has become mainstream, but it is not fully explored yet (Wohlforth 2012). This surge of relevance has pushed the status of literature as one of the most important research topics (MacDonald and Parent 2021). Using the status literature concept to explain the Sino-India asymmetrical rivalry in the Indian Ocean region, this study expands the theoretical concept and sheds new light on the relations between the two Asian giants. The article tries to compare status dilemmas with other concepts and more specifically with conflict-of-interest models. Although the status model has gotten a bit of attention from the scholar community (Wohlforth 2012) yet the concept is still understudied. By comparing it with the conflict-of-interest model (Goldstein 2008) the article tries to divert the already complex world politics from the militarized elements of status dilemma and power transition dynamics (Wohlforth 2012), Also it is worth noting that the relations between India and China do not necessarily fit in the power transition model as both the powers are rising powers, and the bilateral relations includes many non-military dimension (Pu 2022). While the studies of status literature are growing but they still lack the cohesive understanding of status literature and treats status as a source of zero-sum conflict, whereas I argue that the relations between India and China are not always zero-sum, yet they have a competitive nature but still the relationship is unique in both practice and understanding so it needs to be understood with multiple dimensions.

Although many analytical models exist to explain the complex nature of India-China relations the study of status literature is not gone that far at least not in the case of studying China-India relations, to fill the gap I would like to bring my work the scholarly debate can have another added dimension which may value add in the literature of status in world politics in general and concerning India-China relations in particular.

Understanding Status Competition

To understand the status competition first we need to discuss two conventional models of international conflict which are conflict of interest and security dilemma then we will be able to focus on the status competition model and will compare it with a conventional model which is the conflict of interest.

In the studies of International relations, the conventional understanding of the origin of conflict was that when two or more states have overlapping interests and competing claims and preferences which they regarded as key to their national interest and to secure them the states may prefer to go to war (Waltz 2015). In the conventional models of conflict one thing that remains constant is that one power tries to alter the status quo and the other power is certain about the threat, similarly the power transition theory suggests that the chance of conflict rises when the relative power gap between the established power and the rising power shrinks (Kim and Morrow 1992), also when the rising power is dissatisfied with the status quo the quest for status alteration increases (DiCicco and Levy 1999). In this regard, both rising, as well as established powers, have differentiating preferences regarding the status quo, and the great powers always try to maximize their power to be the sole regional hegemon, the maximization tendency targets any rising power that seeks to compete with the regional hegemon (Mearsheimer and Alterman 2001). This tendency of power maximization creates a situation where rising power became security seekers and the power maximizer becomes the aggressor which further drives the international conflict, in the environment of just security seekers without any aggressor the conflict's patterns can't be imagined (Schweller 1996). Similarly, the other conventional model that explains international conflict is the security dilemma. One nation increases its overall defence capabilities which generates a dangerous cycle of arms race among the other states which ultimately lessens the security of all states, Although there are many interpretations of security dilemma (Glaser 1997).

The necessary components of the security dilemma were highlighted by Shiping Tang and those are Anarchy, some evil intentions on both sides and some accretion of power (Tang 2010). Now to understand the difference between a conflict of interest and a status dilemma first we need to understand that in a conflict of interest one party of the conflict has some incentive to alter the status quo whereas for status quo both the parties may not want to alter the status quo yet because of prisoner's dilemma they got driven into conflict spiral due to anarchical nature of the international system (Snyder 1971).

The status competition model and status dilemma model differ in many aspects but to understand that we need to understand the status in world politics. The arising question is why does status matter in world politics? How do countries acquire status? And how to verify that status is achieved? The status in world politics can be defined as “collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive power, culture, demographic position sociopolitical organization and diplomatic clout)” (Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014). Status is relative and depends on the recognition by others, it works as a social entity (Duque 2018). The status-seeking behaviour of states and individuals are pretty much the same and it depends on the psychological behaviour which treats the status as having some sort of intrinsic value that can be treated as an end in itself and in certain situations the status is also treated as means to achieve a higher status or some other benefits for example for a young lawyer having a brand new car may please his/her psychological needs of self-esteem and symbolizes the luxury status owned by the lawyer which can further attract other clients (Frank 2001). Similarly, the rising powers tend to resort to a status-signalling approach by purchasing costly military equipment such as aircraft carriers in the case of China which serves a symbolic purpose (Pu 2019).

In the status competition model, one state has the incentive to change the existing status quo to accumulate a greater share of status in the international order. Whereas if we see status can drive status scarcity and status discrepancy in the international order as it is a scarce resource and cannot be distributed equally among the nations. This status-seeking has become the greater source of conflict in world politics (Lebow 2008). Yet the process of status signalling and recognizing is shaped by uncertainty and mistrust but if the states are well informed about each other capacity and capability as William C. Wohlforth said status dilemma “occurs when two states would be satisfied with their status if they had perfect information about each other's

belief. But in the absence of that certainty, a state's leadership may conclude that its status is under challenge even when it is not" (Wohlforth 2012).

Conflict of Interest: Conventionally Explaining India-China Relations

The border issue between India-China is threatening the bilateral relationship between the two Asian giants, yet in other sectors, the relationship matured to yield great results for both countries. The border issue between India-China needs to be explained through the conflict-of-interest framework rather than the security dilemma as Srinath Raghavan argued (Raghavan 2019). The territorial issue between India and China can be well explained by the conflict-of-interest model, not by security dilemma and this enduring border issue has made things complex where both India and China think and demonstrates that they are defending their sovereignty and both lack a common understanding of existing status quo, the complexity is so much so that even the officials on both sides cannot figure out which part of the border is settled and which part is not (Saran 2017). The conflict-of-interest theory perfectly explains the essence of border dispute yet there are many impediments such as national identity, status-seeking, and political behaviour of elites that are limiting both nations' choices on the border issue (Shankar 2018). For both India and China the question of conceding territory is the question of survival for India giving away land will weaken the nation's will and they don't need to concede land to India (Bajpai 2021). Although both India and China have so much to contribute to the global community yet on the bilateral side of their relationship both nations thinks that having greater engagement may undermine their national status at stake (Garver 2011). The relations between India and China are not to be understood unilaterally with that understanding that the two Asian giants can't collaborate, in the past the two states have proved that they are willing to work together similarly now to improve the bilateral ties and to accommodate each other's status Srinath Raghavan argues that there is multitudinous dimension for India-China relations that goes beyond security dilemma, status dilemma, nationalism and domestic politics (Raghavan 2019). Both India and China should work together on multilateral fora to safeguard their collective interests such as climate change, global oil supply, terrorism and maritime security. India can support China's regional initiatives such as AIIB, and New Development Bank and China should reciprocate by not interfering in India's quest for membership in NSG and the UN security council (Raghavan 2019) as PM Modi said India's membership in NSG will not just strengthen the multilateral for a but will take India China relationship to new heights (Rana 2015).

The asymmetric gap between India and China

There exist multiple views on the China-India rivalry, some argue that it's a one-sided rivalry because China does not think of India as a rival (Shirk 2004). Whereas Garver argues that the Sino-Indian rivalry is not just one-sided but is asymmetric in nature as China is deliberately underestimating Indian capabilities (J. W. Garver 2002). Also, some scholars argue that India will be Beijing's largest adversary in the region and it will be difficult for China to avoid confrontation with India as both are rapidly rising powers (Horner 2015). The understanding of India and China as a rival is deep-rooted in colonial history when in the 1940s the rivalry was one-sided as China perceived British India as a threat, India's ambitions of achieving greater status in Asia and its interference in Tibet made Peking believe that. Similarly in the 1950s after annexing Tibet the rivalry turned two-sided (China 1953). The 1962 debacle turned the perceived threat into a 'geopolitical rivalry' that is 'sufficiently deep-rooted' and even its traces are visible now in the foreign policy decision-making of both India and China, the two sides bend over backwards to conceal their strategic difference in the public (Tellis and Mirski 2013). The scholars also argue that the Sino-India rivalry is based on three fundamentals that are

1. Material power that tilts balances towards China (Paul 2018)
2. Threat perception (China considers the U.S, and Japan a bigger threat than India, but India considers China a bigger threat than Pakistan) (Fang 2013) (J. Garver 2002)
3. Seeking status in international order (China is considered a great power whereas India is still seeking that recognition) (Pu 2017)

It should be well understood through the recent incidents on the border and multilateral forums that India and China are not just ambivalent neighbours trying to overcome their differences to create situations that can accommodate each other's rise. But China and India are 'Strategic rivals' (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2008). The strategic rivalry between India and China may be beneficial for Chinese domestic politics as the party can command the gun more efficiently in the wake of the presence of external threats on the border (Mattingly 2022), Similarly, Indian domestic politics always got influenced by the name of tough stance towards Pakistan (Malone 2011).

For the Chinese policymakers, it was well understood from the early days of China's existence, that China is an established power in the east and particularly after the world war it has a greater role to play in the region (Panikkar 1955). Meanwhile, the tendency of China's elite in the government was to discount India's potential as a great power (Pei 2011) similarly contemporary scholars argue that China has not given up its 'misperception' tendency of discounting India's potential and multilateral forums China is very enthusiastic to promote India's status as developing country (Pu 2017).

The question that everybody may have asked is why China is dismissive of India's status. Where many scholars argue that the material capacity gap between India and China is so huge that it will be nearly impossible for India to catch up to China's level. Another factor that works here is India's foreign policy choices where India was successful in maintaining strategic autonomy during the cold war era, yet it failed to send appropriate signals to Beijing that India has some reliable partners. The unfolding of Indian foreign policy between nonalignment to multi-alignment (Hall 2019) may have sent some appropriate signals to China but still, the QUAD is not materialized, India's capacity as a net security provider in the region is not matching the capacity and the Indian economy is still facing stiff challenges.

Table 1. India and China GDP and Military Expenditure comparison

	1978	1978	1989	1989	2019	2019	
	GDP	ME	GDP	ME	GDP	ME	
CHINA	\$149.54bn	N.A	\$347.77bn	\$11bn	\$14.34tr	\$261.1bn	
INDIA	\$137.3bn	\$3.98bn	\$296.04bn	\$10.6bn	\$2.87tr	\$71.1bn	

Note: GDP are from the world bank, for Military expenditure data is from SIPRI.

Indian Ocean Region: India's backyard or China's playground

Indian ocean region was known for its strategic meeting ground Diageo Garcia of the US, Reunion Island of France, the British Indian Ocean territory of the UK, India's backyard, and China's playing field of power projection (Cordesman and Toukan 2014). In China's world view India has long been on the quest to dominate the Indian Ocean region and to treat it as its backyard. Analysts argue that Sino-Indian military power and conflict are localized to the

region of the Himalayas (O'Donnell and Bollfrass 2020). Whereas India always had a strategic advantage over China in the Indian Ocean region (Brewster 2016). This advantageous position of India always spooked China to look beyond its maritime borders.

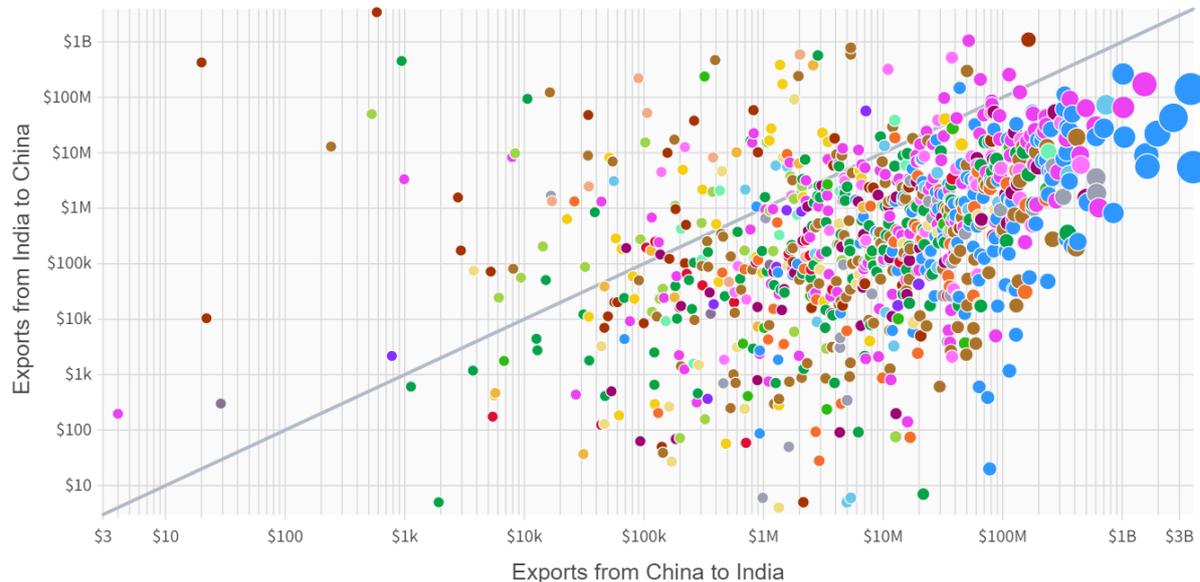


Figure 1 The exports and imports between India and China
Source: OECD

The overreliance on Chinese trade on the Indian ocean line of communication made Chinese exports and imports vulnerable to Indian threat, this led China to formulate a policy to stop the Indian ocean from becoming India's ocean. Chinese leaders always believed that India is on the path of being a regional hegemon in the IOR which can seriously threaten China's energy security, maritime independence, and capacity to trade with west Asia and Africa. In the early 1980s and 1990s, there was a common understanding among the Chinese elite that 'China is not prepared to let the Indian ocean become India's ocean' (Roy 1998). One of China's ambassadors to India once said that 'India has the best strategic position in the Indian ocean – it's like a big dagger penetrating the heart of the Indian ocean' (Ruisheng 2011).

India's abilities in the IOR are a problem for Beijing because 'China has an ambition of connecting its southwestern region with south Asian region' (Tellis and Mirski 2013), especially through its ambitious project of BRI and CPEC. Also, it is worth noting that to be a true global power China can't afford to be just an East Asian power so unless China secures its interests in South Asia-Indian Ocean Region it can't have the ability to be a regional hegemon (Garver 2019, 93). India is not just limiting Chinese grand ambitions in SA-IOR but India itself

is a rising power and its policy of moving eastwards is a serious threat to China's abilities in the region.

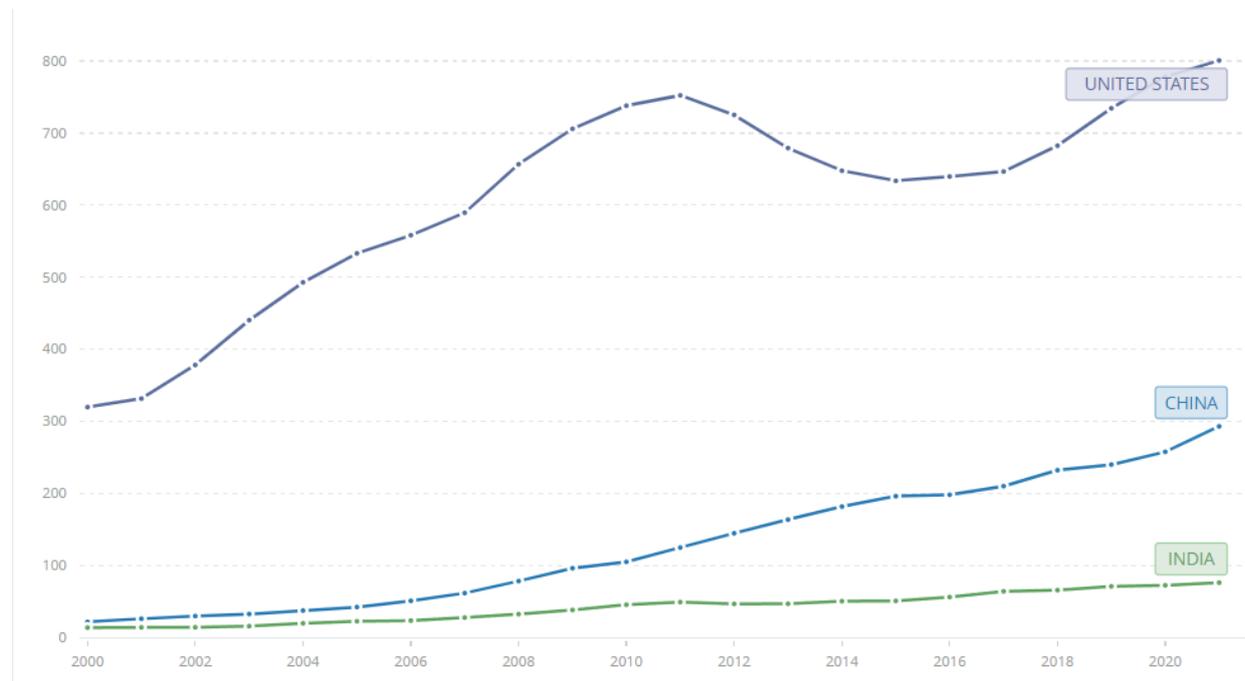


Figure 2: Military spending of U.S. China and India

Source: SIPRI

In the Indian Ocean region, China not just faces the threat of constructive assertive India but the west's spree to limit Chinese expansionism is on the rise. The U.S led west is in no mood to let China go away with its grand ambitions of building strategic relations with the countries of west Asia and Africa. Even the countries of the region have started talking about alliance building in the Indian Ocean region, Although India may not want to join any alliance at this time. But India is no more just a small power trying to safeguard its national interests the rising China is a threat to the region, the same region that India considers to be its backyard. With the limited capacity of military and economic strength to safeguard its region from an expansionist power like China, India must go beyond its idealistic perceptions of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment (Pant 2020). India's evasive balancing may not bring the desired results for India as New Delhi tries to convince Beijing that it is not building an alliance against China (Rajagopalan 2020), but perception and dilemma play a greater role in International politics so between India and China (Pu 2022).

Although it was agreed that the material power gap, asymmetric threat perceptions, and status matter to some degree in India-China relations but often a few of these arguments exaggerate

the situation between India and China, China's military spending indeed is four-time of Indian spending, the Chinese economy is four times Indian economy but the submissive attitude of China's elite towards India predates the material and military capability acquired by China in last three decades. At the same time, the future of the Chinese economy rise is in disdain as Sushan Shirk argues in 'Overreach: How China derailed its peaceful rise' that the conditions China had in the past three decades are now not available for them and the world is becoming more reluctant to see assertive China behaving unilaterally in south China sea and IOR (Shirk 2022).

Conclusion

The asymmetry between India and China is not going to fade away in just a few years, or maybe the gradual decline of the asymmetrical gap between the two Asian giants can create more trouble in the region (Chaudhuri and Ravallion 2006). India's economic growth rate exceeds that of China then India will be the world's fastest-growing major economy. The relative power between China and U.S. and China and Japan dyad may shift towards China but in the case of India, Indian capacity building is reducing the asymmetrical gap. It is also worth noting that China's threat perception regarding US and Japan is more than India, whereas the material capacity of India is strengthened by India's strategic partnership with US and Japan. These two countries are the prime opponents of China's rise India may find it difficult to balance the situation both internally and externally (Rajagopalan 2019). On one hand, both India and China are growing rapidly, and the material gap between India and China is widening in certain spaces in a few areas India is trying to dominate, but for the Chinese to secure their interests in the Indian Ocean region they must invest mammoth resources to achieve desired goals. The investment blitzkrieg will reduce China's capacity to be a dominant power in its backyard, so it is highly unlikely that the Chinese will divide their resources in which it is highly likely that the desired aims will not be achieved. India's quest to have a self-sufficient military and blue water navy is a serious threat to Chinese ambitions in IOR. Finally, if India can continue to grow at a rapid pace this will provide a new model of growth for countries around the world this will create a much-awaited dent in the Chinese model. India can create a growth mode something like the "Mumbai Consensus" at par with the 'Washington consensus and Beijing Consensus' (Das 2006). It will boost India's status around the world.

India must also look beyond its immediate neighbourhood where it can work with like-minded states having an interest in the Indian Ocean region such as France, U.K, Australia and New Zealand. India's capacity to enforce international law in the Indian Ocean region must be reiterated, also it is high time for India to demarcate its ambitions in the Indian Ocean region. Merely iteration of philosophical ideas without any material strength will backfire for India and can create a situation where the loss of trust will be dreaded for India's IOR policy. Also, things that had worked in the past may not be able to provide the relevant solutions to the contemporary situations in the present so India must clearly understand its objectives in the region, organizations and nations that are not abiding by International Law and Traditional and Non-Traditional security threats. At the same time Both India and China do need to work with open-mindedness so as not to cross the 'Chinese red line and Indian red line' the two Asian giants 'should strive to occupy a greater mind space of the other' (Jaishankar 2020). Despite all these rivalries India and China must understand that the Asian dream is not possible without the confluence of interests and trust between the world's two largest countries, the power politics, security dilemmas and conflicting ideologies may hamper the overall growth yet their is multitudinous possibility of cooperation which should be understood by the policymakers in Beijing and New Delhi.

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