



Sino-Indian Strategic Competition in the Persian Gulf Region

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Abstract

The strategic competition between China and India in the Persian Gulf region is driven by their growing energy needs, economic interests, and ambitions to expand their geopolitical influence. The Persian Gulf's significance as a major source of oil and gas has made it a focal point for both countries' foreign policies. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has helped it establish a strong economic foothold through large-scale infrastructure investments and strategic partnerships, particularly with Iran. Meanwhile, India's "Link West" policy has deepened its engagement with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, strengthening its

economic and defense ties. The rivalry has extended from economic to military domains, with both countries seeking to secure their strategic interests and expand their regional presence. This competition also attracts the attention of external powers, including the United States and Russia, further complicating the Gulf's security landscape. For Gulf States, the growing rivalry presents both opportunities and risks. While engaging with both China and India offers avenues for economic diversification and strategic partnerships, it could also lead to increased regional polarization and destabilization. This article outlines the dynamics of the Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Persian Gulf, its impact on regional stability, and the evolving geopolitical environment as both powers continue to expand their influence in this critical region.

Keywords: Sino-Indian Competition, Persian Gulf, Energy Security, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Link West Policy, Geopolitical Rivalry, Gulf States, Regional Stability, External Actors.

Introduction

The Persian Gulf region has long been at the center of global geopolitical competition due to its immense reserves of oil and natural gas. These resources make it a vital area for the energy security of numerous nations. Historically dominated by Western powers, particularly the United States and European countries, the Gulf is now witnessing an increasing presence of Asian powers, notably China and India. These two nations, among the world's most populous and fastest-growing economies, have expanded their economic and geopolitical influence, and their growing involvement in the Persian Gulf has sparked a strategic rivalry that is transforming the region's power balance.

Background of the Study

China and India have become prominent players in the Persian Gulf largely due to their growing demand for energy resources and the pursuit of energy security. Both countries rely heavily on energy imports to fuel their rapidly expanding economies, and the Persian Gulf, which includes some of the world's leading oil-producing countries

such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is a critical source of these imports. The growing energy demands of these Asian giants have made the Gulf a crucial area of interest, thereby bringing them into closer engagement and, inevitably, competition.¹ As they seek to secure energy supplies and expand their geopolitical influence, China and India have adopted distinct strategies, which have led to overlapping interests and contestation.

China's engagement in the Persian Gulf forms a key component of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to create an system of trade corridors and infrastructure projects connecting Europe, Asia and Africa. Through the BRI, China has significantly increased its investments in the Gulf region, concentrating on the development of strategic assets such as ports, industrial zones, and energy-related infrastructure. These investments are not only aimed at securing energy resources, they are also part of China's strategy to increase its strategic influence in the region and beyond. India, in contrast, has pursued a more traditional approach, seeking to strengthen bilateral relations with Gulf States through diplomatic engagement, trade partnerships, and security cooperation. India's Look West Policy, which complements its Act East Policy, underscores the strategic importance of the Gulf region in its foreign policy framework.²

Metric	China	India
% of Oil Imports from Gulf	42%	58%
Natural Gas Imports (bcm)	28 bcm	18 bcm
Key Gulf Partners	Saudi Arabia, Iran	Saudi Arabia, UAE
Strategic Initiatives	BRI	Link West Policy

Table 1: Comparative Energy Dependence of China and India on the Persian Gulf (2021–2023)

The strategic rivalry between the two states in the Persian Gulf is further intensified by the larger geopolitical landscape, which includes the active involvement of other major powers such as the United States and Russia. Additionally, enduring regional tensions, most notably the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, add further complexity to the competition between the two Asian giants. This multifaceted

¹ Harsh V. Pant and V. Kaura, "India's Middle East Strategy: Between Trade, Diaspora, and Security," *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 53–66; Harsh V. Pant and V. Kaura, "India and the Gulf: Building Strategic Partnerships," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 2 (2019): 107–19.

² Pant, Harsh V., and Yogesh Joshi. *The China-India Rivalry in the Global South: South Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East*. London: Routledge, 2020.

competition not only influences regional dynamics but also has the potential to impact global energy markets and international security. Thus, understanding the motivations, strategies, and implications of the Sino-Indian competition in the Persian Gulf is essential for comprehending the evolving geopolitical landscape of the region and its wider ramifications.

Strategic Importance of the Persian Gulf for China and India

The strategic significance of the Persian Gulf for both China and India is immense. Home to around 48 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 38 percent of global natural gas reserves, the region serves as a vital source of energy, making it indispensable to the energy security strategies of these rapidly growing economies.³ For both China and India, securing a stable and reliable supply of energy from the Gulf is a top priority due to their rapidly growing economies and increasing energy consumption. For China, the Persian Gulf supplies more than 40 percent of its total crude oil imports, making the region a linchpin for its energy security strategy. The stability and security of these energy supplies are critical for sustaining China's economic growth and maintaining domestic stability. Additionally, the Persian Gulf serves as a key node in China's Maritime Silk Road, a central component of the BRI. Through substantial investments in port infrastructure, energy projects, and industrial zones, China aims to enhance its strategic presence in the Gulf, secure its energy supplies, and gain a foothold in a region traditionally dominated by Western powers.⁴

For India, the Persian Gulf is equally significant. The region accounts for nearly 60 percent of India's total crude oil imports, and the Gulf States are among India's largest trading partners. Additionally, the Gulf is home to a large Indian diaspora, with over 8 million Indians living and working in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Remittances from this diaspora are a significant source of foreign exchange for India, further underscoring the importance of maintaining strong relations with Gulf States. Consequently, India has made considerable efforts to strengthen its political,

³ Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). *World Oil Outlook 2021*. Vienna: OPEC, 2021.

⁴ Chaziza, Mordechai. "China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy and Emerging Partnerships." *The Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019): 345–62.; Chaziza, Mordechai. "China and the Persian Gulf: Implications for the United States." *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 93–105.

economic, and security ties with key Gulf States.⁵ Due to their significant reliance on the Persian Gulf for energy supplies, both China and India have actively pursued long-term energy agreements, invested in energy-related infrastructure, and taken steps to diversify their energy sources within the region. These efforts are aimed at ensuring stable, secure, and sustained access to vital oil and natural gas resources to support their domestic energy needs and economic growth. This shared dependence has inevitably led to competition for influence and access to energy resources, resulting in a complex interplay of strategic rivalry and economic interdependence.

Imperatives Guiding China and India's Policies in the Persian Gulf

1. Energy Security

Securing a stable and reliable supply of energy is the primary driver of both China and India's engagement in the Persian Gulf. As the world's largest and third-largest importers of crude oil, respectively, both nations have prioritized energy security in their foreign policy agendas. This has led them to pursue long-term energy agreements, invest in upstream and downstream energy projects, and establish strategic partnerships with Gulf States to ensure uninterrupted access to energy resources.⁶

2. Economic Interests

Both China and India maintain strong trade relations with the Persian Gulf region, with trade volumes increasing steadily over the past decade. China's trade with the GCC reached over \$200 billion in 2020, making it the GCC's largest trading partner. Similarly, India's trade with the GCC exceeded \$120 billion in the same year, highlighting the economic significance of the region for both countries.⁷ Beyond energy, China and India are also interested in expanding their influence in the Gulf through investments in infrastructure, technology, and other sectors.

3. Geopolitical Influence

⁵ Mohan, C. Raja. "India and the Gulf: The Search for a New Strategic Role." *International Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2020): 312–30.

⁶ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Niv Horesh. *China's Presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt, One Road Initiative*. London: Routledge, 2017.

⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF). *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2021.

The Persian Gulf is a critical geopolitical theater due to its strategic location and proximity to key maritime trade routes, including the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world's oil passes. Control over these trade routes and maritime chokepoints is of paramount importance for both China and India. With China leveraging the BRI to deepen its strategic presence and India working to assert itself as a key regional actor, the Persian Gulf has increasingly become a focal point of geopolitical rivalry.⁸

4. Counterbalancing Other Powers

China and India's engagement in the Gulf is also influenced by their desire to counterbalance other major powers, particularly the United States and Russia. For China, the Gulf offers an opportunity to expand its influence in a region where the U.S. has traditionally been the dominant external power. For India, engaging with Gulf States is part of its broader strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence in Asia and beyond.⁹

China's Strategic Approach in the region

China's strategic approach in the Persian Gulf is characterized by its focus on economic engagement and infrastructure development. As discussed, through BRI, China has been able to establish strong economic ties with Gulf States through investments in ports, industrial zones, and energy projects. In recent years, China has signed several strategic agreements with key Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE. These partnerships cover a wide range of areas, from energy cooperation to technology and defense.¹⁰

Moreover, China has sought to expand its security footprint in the Gulf through increased military-to-military exchanges, joint naval exercises, and arms sales. While China's security-related activities in the region remains limited compared to that of the U.S., its growing security ties with Gulf States indicate a shift towards a more comprehensive strategic approach. China's broader geopolitical objectives in the Gulf

⁸ Scobell, Andrew, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley. "China's Strategy toward South Asia and the Gulf." *Asian Security* 14, no. 2 (2018): 213–34.

⁹ Pant and Joshi, *The China-India Rivalry in the Global South*.

¹⁰ Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy."; Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: Implications for the United States."

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include securing its energy supplies, enhancing its strategic influence, and reducing its dependence on maritime routes controlled by other powers.¹¹

India's Strategic Approach in the region

India's engagement with the Persian Gulf is shaped by its pursuit of energy security, economic partnerships, and strategic cooperation. In contrast to China's more assertive stance through initiatives like BRI, India has prioritized cultivating robust bilateral relationships with Gulf nations. Central to this effort is India's Look West Policy, which underscores the Gulf's significance within its broader foreign policy strategy. As part of this approach, India has worked to deepen its ties with major regional players, including Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar.¹²

India has significantly broadened its economic footprint in the Persian Gulf by increasing trade and investing in key sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and technology. Alongside economic engagement, India has also worked to enhance its security cooperation with Gulf States through initiatives like joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defense pacts. These actions align with India's overarching strategy to counter China's expanding influence in the region and to assert itself as a major strategic partner in the Gulf.¹³

Implications of Sino-Indian Competition

As China and India expand their presence in the Gulf, their actions will inevitably impact regional security dynamics. Increased military cooperation with Gulf States, arms sales, and security agreements could contribute to a regional arms race and exacerbate existing tensions.¹⁴ The competition between China and India for access to Gulf energy resources could also influence global energy markets. Any disruption in the flow of energy from the Gulf would have far-reaching consequences for global energy prices and the energy security of other major importers. While the competition between China and India in the Gulf is primarily strategic, there are also opportunities for cooperation, particularly in areas such as energy security and counterterrorism. However, their rivalry could also lead to increased tensions and conflict, particularly if

¹¹ Ehteshami and Horesh, *China's Presence in the Middle East*.

¹² Mohan, "India and the Gulf."

¹³ Pant and Kaura, "India's Middle East Strategy"; Pant and Kaura, "India and the Gulf."

¹⁴ Scobell, Ratner, and Beckley, "China's Strategy toward South Asia and the Gulf."

their actions are perceived as threatening by other regional powers or external actors such as the U.S.¹⁵

The strategic competition between China and India in the Persian Gulf is a complex and evolving phenomenon that has significant implications for regional and global stability. By examining the motivations, strategies, and consequences of their engagement, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play and contribute to the academic discourse on emerging powers and regional security. As China and India continue to expand their presence in the Gulf, their actions will shape the future of the region and influence the broader geopolitical landscape.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Sino-Indian Competition

Most literature on Sino-Indian competition in the Persian Gulf adopts a realist framework, focusing on power dynamics, state interests, and strategic competition. Realist scholars view the Persian Gulf as a theater where China and India, as emerging regional powers, are striving to secure strategic advantages and balance each other's influence. Pant and Joshi argue that the Gulf's strategic significance for both China and India is linked to their broader geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁶ This perspective suggests that the Persian Gulf is an extension of their power struggle, where both nations seek to establish themselves as regional hegemons.

In contrast, liberal scholars emphasize the economic interdependence between China, India, and the Gulf states. They argue that economic engagement, rather than strategic competition, is the primary driver of China and India's involvement in the region.¹⁷ According to this view, economic cooperation and integration in areas such as energy security, trade, and investment can potentially mitigate tensions and promote stability in the Gulf. Constructivist approaches offer a different perspective by focusing on the role of identity, perception, and historical context in shaping Sino-Indian relations in the Gulf. Ehteshami and Horesh contend that China and India's strategies in the region are influenced by their historical interactions with the Gulf and their

¹⁵ Pant and Kaura, "India's Middle East Strategy"; Pant and Kaura, "India and the Gulf."

¹⁶ Pant and Joshi, *The China-India Rivalry in the Global South*.

¹⁷ Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy."; Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: Implications for the United States."

evolving identities as emerging global powers. This perspective highlights how perceptions of strategic competition are constructed and how these perceptions shape policy choices and strategic behavior.¹⁸

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with thematic analysis to explore the strategic competition between China and India in the Persian Gulf. The approach allows for a nuanced examination of both countries' motivations, such as energy security and economic interests, and their respective strategies, including China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Look West policy. Data was gathered from credible, recent secondary sources like academic literature, policy reports, and government documents. Thematic analysis was conducted through a systematic process of coding and identifying patterns to address key research questions on motivations, strategies, and regional impacts. Ethical standards were maintained through proper citation and balanced interpretation.

Historical Context of Sino-Indian Engagement in the Persian Gulf

Historically, both China and India have maintained long-standing ties with the Persian Gulf, dating back to ancient trade routes such as the Silk Road. The modern era has seen these ties evolve into complex economic and strategic relationships. India's engagement with the Gulf intensified after its economic liberalization in the 1990s, as the country sought to secure energy supplies to sustain its rapid economic growth.¹⁹ India's "Look West" policy, initiated in the early 2000s, was a strategic effort to strengthen its economic and political ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and counterbalance China's growing influence in the region.²⁰

China's engagement with the Persian Gulf is relatively recent, becoming more prominent with the launch of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI aims to create a network of trade routes and infrastructure projects connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, with the Persian Gulf playing a central role in this strategy. Through investments in ports, industrial zones, and energy projects, China has sought to

¹⁸ Ehteshami and Horesh, *China's Presence in the Middle East*.

¹⁹ Mohan, "India and the Gulf."

²⁰ Pant and Kaura, "India's Middle East Strategy"; Pant and Kaura, "India and the Gulf."

establish itself as a key player in the region.²¹ This has challenged India's traditional influence and has intensified the strategic rivalry between the two countries in the Gulf.

Strategic Dynamics

Energy security, driven by the Persian Gulf's vast oil and gas reserves, is a central factor in China and India's strategic engagement with the region, forming a core part of their national security agendas. China currently imports more than 40 percent of its crude oil from the Gulf, while India sources nearly 60 percent of its crude oil from the region. This dependency on Gulf energy makes both countries vulnerable to disruptions in the region, thereby heightening the stakes of their competition. Sino-Indian competition in the Persian Gulf is driven by both economic and geopolitical interests. China and India, with trade volumes of over \$200 billion and \$120 billion respectively, compete for influence through infrastructure and energy deals. Their rivalry extends to strategic control over key maritime routes, with China leveraging the BRI and India deepening defense ties to counterbalance China's growing presence

China's strategic approach in the Persian Gulf is primarily driven by its Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI has enabled China to establish strong economic and strategic ties with Gulf States through investments in infrastructure, energy projects, and logistics hubs. China's economic engagement in the Gulf is complemented by its growing security presence, as evidenced by its increasing arms sales, joint military exercises, and the establishment of a military base in Djibouti. This shift towards a more comprehensive approach suggests that China is seeking to position itself as a key security player in the region, challenging the traditional dominance of Western powers and India.²²

India's strategic approach to the Persian Gulf is characterized by its "Look West" policy, which emphasizes building strong bilateral relations with key Gulf States based on shared historical, cultural, and economic ties. India's strategy focuses on leveraging its large expatriate community in the Gulf, numbering over 8 million people, as a bridge for strengthening economic and strategic relations. The Indian diaspora in the

²¹ Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy."; Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: Implications for the United States."

²² Ibid.

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Gulf contributes significantly to India's economy through remittances, making the welfare of its expatriates a key priority for the Indian government.

In contrast to China's state-centric and infrastructure-driven approach, India has sought to deepen its engagement with the Gulf through soft power and cultural diplomacy. This includes promoting people-to-people ties, educational exchanges, and tourism. However, India has also expanded its security cooperation through joint military exercises, defense agreements, and intelligence sharing, aiming to present itself as a reliable security partner in the region. This dual approach of economic and security engagement defines India's strategy in the Gulf and distinguishes it from China's more aggressive economic and strategic policies.

Impact on the Persian Gulf Region

The strategic competition between China and India in the Persian Gulf has significant implications for regional stability, economic development, and security dynamics. The growing presence of both countries in the region has provided Gulf States with greater leverage in their dealings with external powers, enabling them to extract economic and strategic concessions. However, this increased competition also has the potential to exacerbate regional tensions, particularly if China and India's actions are perceived as threatening by other major powers such as the United States and Russia.

The impact of Sino-Indian competition on regional security is a subject of concern for many scholars. As both countries expand their security cooperation, there is a risk of an arms race or increased militarization in the region. This could destabilize the already volatile security environment of the Gulf, where rivalries between regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran are a constant source of tension.²³ Moreover, the involvement of external powers such as the United States, which has traditionally been the dominant security provider in the Gulf, adds another layer of complexity to the regional security dynamics. Competition empowers Gulf States but risks polarization.²⁴

²³ Scobell, Ratner, and Beckley, "China's Strategy toward South Asia and the Gulf."

²⁴ Zaccara, Luciano, and Matteo Legrenzi. "Gulf-Asia Relations in the Post-COVID Era: Continuity and Change." *Middle East Policy* 29, no. 1 (2022): 45–60.

Economically, the competition between China and India has had both positive and negative impacts on the Gulf region. While their investments and trade have contributed to economic growth and diversification, particularly in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and technology, the rivalry for market access and strategic assets has created challenges for Gulf States in managing their relationships with both countries. Balancing the interests of China and India, while maintaining ties with other major powers, has become a complex task for Gulf States, requiring skillful diplomacy and strategic foresight.

The literature on Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Persian Gulf highlights the complexity of the rivalry and its implications for regional and global stability. The competition is driven by multiple factors, including energy security, economic interests, and geopolitical influence, and is shaped by the broader strategic rivalry between China and India in Asia. While there are opportunities for cooperation in areas such as energy security and counterterrorism, the growing presence of both countries in the Gulf has the potential to destabilize the region and complicate the security environment. Understanding the motivations, strategies, and impact of this competition is essential for policymakers and scholars seeking to navigate the evolving dynamics of the Persian Gulf region.

Discussion of the key findings

The Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Persian Gulf region represents a dynamic and multifaceted geopolitical phenomenon that has significant implications for regional stability, energy security, and international relations. By contextualizing the major themes identified—energy security and economic interests, geopolitical strategies and military presence, influence on regional stability, and interactions with external powers—this section provides an in-depth analysis of the factors driving Sino-Indian competition and the broader regional and global impacts.

The discussion serves as a bridge between the analysis of empirical data and the broader theoretical and policy implications of the study. It explores the underlying motivations of both countries, their strategic objectives, and the potential outcomes of their rivalry. By situating the Sino-Indian competition within the framework of contemporary international relations theories, such as realism, economic

interdependence, and regional security complexes, it contributes to the academic discourse and provides valuable insights for policymakers and analysts navigating the evolving dynamics of the Persian Gulf region.

The thematic analysis identified four key themes that underpin Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Persian Gulf region: energy security and economic interests, geopolitical strategies and military presence, influence on regional stability, and interactions with external powers. Each of these themes reflects a distinct dimension of the rivalry and sheds light on the unique strategies adopted by China and India to secure their national interests in the region.

Energy Security and Economic Interests

Energy security remains the primary driver of China and India's engagement in the Persian Gulf. The region's vast reserves of oil and natural gas make it a critical source of energy for both countries, which rely heavily on Gulf energy imports to fuel their growing economies. As noted earlier, China imports over 40% of its oil from the Gulf, while India's dependency is even higher, with the Gulf accounting for nearly 60% of its total crude oil imports.²⁵ This heavy reliance on Gulf energy resources has led both countries to prioritize securing long-term energy partnerships and diversifying their supply routes to mitigate vulnerabilities. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has played a pivotal role in shaping its energy strategy in the Gulf. Through investments in infrastructure projects such as ports, refineries, and pipelines, China has established a network of economic partnerships across the region, which not only facilitates its energy imports but also strengthens its strategic presence.²⁶ The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for example, provides an alternative route for energy imports, bypassing the strategic chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz. By reducing its dependence on vulnerable maritime routes, China aims to enhance its energy security and reduce its exposure to potential disruptions.

India, in contrast, has adopted a more diversified approach to securing its energy interests in the Gulf. While it has sought long-term energy contracts and

²⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration. *China International Energy Data and Analysis*. Washington, DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2021. <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN>.

²⁶ Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy."; Chaziza, "China and the Persian Gulf: Implications for the United States."

investments in Gulf energy projects, it has also focused on enhancing its economic ties and leveraging its large diaspora in the region. The “Look West” policy, which emphasizes trade, investment, and cultural diplomacy, has enabled India to deepen its engagement with Gulf States and secure strategic partnerships that go beyond energy. By balancing its energy interests with broader economic and cultural ties, India aims to establish itself as a key partner in the region. The competition between China and India for energy resources has broader implications for global energy markets and the strategic calculations of Gulf States. As both countries vie for access to Gulf energy, they have driven up the demand for Gulf oil and gas, contributing to fluctuations in global energy prices and influencing the strategic choices of Gulf States which, in turn, have sought to leverage their relationships with China and India to diversify their economic partnerships and reduce their reliance on Western markets. This dynamic interplay between energy security and economic interests underscores the complexity of Sino-Indian competition in the Gulf and its broader regional and global impacts.

Geopolitical Strategies and Military Presence

The geopolitical strategies adopted by China and India in the Persian Gulf reveal their contrasting approaches to regional influence and power projection. While China has focused on expanding its economic footprint and establishing a military presence, India has emphasized its historical ties, cultural diplomacy, and soft power to strengthen its position in the region.

China’s strategic investments in Gulf infrastructure projects, under the umbrella of the BRI, have been complemented by a growing military presence in the region. The establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti and the regular deployment of its navy in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations signify China’s intention to protect its maritime interests and energy supply routes. These developments have raised concerns among regional and global actors, as they indicate China’s broader strategic ambitions in the region and its willingness to project power beyond its immediate neighborhood. China’s Djibouti base and India’s naval exercises reflect militarization risks.²⁷ India, on the other hand, has sought to enhance its security partnerships with Gulf States through joint military exercises, defense cooperation agreements, and an

²⁷ Fulton, Jonathan. “China’s Changing Role in the Middle East.” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021): 143–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2021.1926654>.

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increased naval presence. India's growing security cooperation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, for instance, reflects its desire to be seen as a reliable security partner in the Gulf and to counterbalance China's growing influence. India's efforts to deepen its security ties with Gulf States have been complemented by its cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections, which have strengthened its soft power in the region.

The geopolitical competition between China and India in the Gulf has significant implications for regional security and stability. As both countries seek to expand their influence, they have contributed to a militarization of the region, heightening tensions and complicating the security landscape. This dynamic also has the potential to draw other powers, such as the United States and Russia, into the competition, further destabilizing the region.

Influence on Regional Stability

The strategic rivalry between China and India in the Persian Gulf has profound implications for regional stability. Their competing interests and actions can exacerbate existing regional tensions and create new security challenges. As both countries deepen their engagement in the Gulf, they may inadvertently contribute to a security dilemma, where their efforts to enhance their own security are perceived as threatening by other regional actors, leading to an arms race or increased militarization. One key area of concern is the impact of Sino-Indian competition on the internal dynamics of Gulf States. As both powers seek to establish strategic partnerships with different Gulf countries, they could contribute to intra-Gulf rivalries, such as the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. China's close economic and strategic ties with Iran, for instance, have raised concerns in Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, leading them to seek closer ties with India as a counterbalance. This dynamic could further polarize the region and make it more difficult to achieve regional stability.

Furthermore, the competition between China and India could complicate efforts to address shared security challenges in the Gulf, such as terrorism, piracy, and maritime security. Both countries have a vested interest in maintaining the security of the region, particularly in safeguarding the free flow of energy resources. However, their strategic rivalry may hinder cooperation and lead to a fragmented security

environment, where different actors pursue their own interests rather than collective security.

Interactions with External Powers

The presence of external powers, particularly the United States and Russia, adds another layer of complexity to Sino-Indian competition in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. has traditionally been the dominant security actor in the Gulf, maintaining a strong military presence and close ties with key regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, China's growing economic presence and military footprint in the region have raised concerns in Washington, leading to increased efforts to counterbalance China's influence.

India's strategic alignment with the United States, particularly through frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), has further complicated the dynamics of Sino-Indian competition in the Gulf. While India seeks to maintain a balanced approach and avoid taking sides in the U.S.-China rivalry, its growing ties with the U.S. and its efforts to counter China's influence have not gone unnoticed in Beijing.²⁸ This interaction between Sino-Indian competition and U.S.-China rivalry has the potential to further destabilize the Gulf, as regional states navigate their relationships with these external powers.²⁹

Russia's role in the Gulf, while less pronounced than that of the U.S. and China, is also significant. Russia has sought to enhance its presence in the Gulf through arms sales, energy partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives. Both China and India have engaged with Russia on Gulf-related issues, with China collaborating with Russia on energy projects and India seeking to leverage its historical ties with Moscow to bolster its position in the region. The interplay between these external powers and Sino-Indian competition in the Gulf underscores the complexity of the region's geopolitics and the potential for great power rivalry to shape its future. The strategic competition between

²⁸ Pant and Joshi, *The China-India Rivalry in the Global South*.

²⁹ Maqbool, Iqra, Kiran Hina, Wasim Malik, and Muhammad Arslan. "Tourism, Identity, and Vision 2030: A Neo-Nationalist Analysis of Red Sea Global's Impact on Saudi Arabia's Future." *Migration Letters* 21, no. S14 (2024): 257–71.; Maqbool, Iqra, Ameer Mahmood, Khizar M. Awan, and Kiran Hina. "Cognitive Biases in Leadership Decision-Making: A Comprehensive Study of Western and Middle Eastern Powers' Responses to the Ukrainian and Palestinian Refugee Crises amid Global Geopolitical Tensions." *Competitive Research Journal* 2, no. 4 (2024): 113–30.

China and India in the Persian Gulf region represents a unique convergence of their economic, political, and security interests, set against the backdrop of a highly complex and dynamic geopolitical environment. The Gulf is not only a vital source of energy for both countries but also a region of significant strategic value due to its central position in global trade routes, maritime security, and broader geopolitical considerations.

Analysis

The strategic rivalry between China and India in the Persian Gulf reflects not only their national interests but also broader shifts in the global geopolitical landscape. Although energy security remains the principal driver of their engagement, the manner in which both states pursue their objectives reveals contrasting models of statecraft: China's centralized, infrastructure-led approach versus India's more balanced and multi-dimensional engagement.

What distinguishes this competition is its non-zero-sum nature. While both countries seek influence, their actions have thus far avoided direct confrontation and have even opened opportunities for selective cooperation in areas such as maritime security and counter-piracy. This nuance is often overshadowed by the more prominent narratives of strategic rivalry.

One notable finding is the role of agency among Gulf States. Rather than being passive arenas of influence, countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran are actively navigating Sino-Indian competition to their advantage, leveraging it to diversify foreign partnerships, attract infrastructure investments, and strengthen their geopolitical positioning. This suggests a regional rebalancing in which smaller states are asserting strategic autonomy amid great power rivalry.

Another insight is that the Gulf region is becoming an extended frontier of Indo-Pacific competition, which expands the relevance of Sino-Indian dynamics beyond the traditional Asian context. This evolution has implications for the Indo-Pacific strategy frameworks advanced by the United States, the Quad, and EU actors, who must now consider the Gulf not as a separate theatre but as part of a broader converging strategic geography.

The Sino-Indian competition in the Persian Gulf is not merely a bilateral rivalry but a component of a multipolar realignment, shaped by the choices of regional actors and the involvement of global powers. Its long-term trajectory will be determined less by zero-sum confrontations and more by how each actor navigates overlapping interests, shifting alliances, and evolving regional norms.

Conclusion

The strategic rivalry between China and India in the Persian Gulf region is driven by their need to secure energy resources, expand economic ties, and increase geopolitical influence. Both countries are heavily dependent on the Gulf for oil and gas, making the region a focal point for their foreign policies. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has enabled it to deepen its economic presence through large-scale investments in infrastructure and energy projects, while India's "Link West" policy focuses on leveraging its historical ties, expanding trade, and strengthening bilateral partnerships.

Beyond energy, the competition extends to military and strategic domains. China's growing military presence in the Gulf and surrounding waters, alongside its partnerships with Iran, has raised concerns for India, which sees this as a potential threat to its interests. In response, India has enhanced defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, seeking to counterbalance China's influence.³⁰ The rivalry also influences regional dynamics, contributing to polarization, particularly between the GCC states and Iran. For Gulf States, the China-India competition presents an opportunity to diversify strategic partnerships, attracting investment and enhancing regional stability. However, it also carries the risk of increased militarization and strategic alignment that could destabilize the region. The involvement of external powers like the U.S. and Russia adds further complexity, as they seek to maintain influence in a region critical to global energy security. The future of the Persian Gulf will be shaped by how China and India navigate their competition, balance their strategic interests, and engage with regional actors. Managing this rivalry will require

³⁰ Dorsey, James M. "The Gulf's Asian Pivot: From Energy Consumers to Strategic Partners." *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 2 (2022): 234–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2022.2065314>.

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Gulf States to adopt balanced and flexible policies, promoting multilateral cooperation and ensuring their own strategic autonomy amidst changing global dynamics.

Recommendations

Given the complex and evolving nature of Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Persian Gulf, several key recommendations emerge. First, Gulf States should actively diversify their strategic partnerships by balancing engagement with both China and India, thereby avoiding overdependence on any single power. This approach will enhance their strategic autonomy and economic resilience, particularly in a region increasingly shaped by great-power rivalry.

Secondly, China and India should prioritize multilateral dialogue and regional cooperation mechanisms to manage tensions and reduce the risks of militarization. By participating in forums that include Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and other stakeholders, both powers can contribute to regional stability while safeguarding their own interests. Joint initiatives in fields like energy security, counterterrorism, and maritime safety could serve as confidence-building measures.

Thirdly, Gulf States should invest in strengthening their own internal stability and economic diversification efforts, as laid out in initiatives like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. Reducing reliance on oil revenues and promoting knowledge-based economies will make Gulf countries less vulnerable to external political pressures and global energy market fluctuations.

Fourthly, external powers, particularly the United States and Russia, must recognize the new dynamics emerging in the Persian Gulf. Their policies should encourage inclusive regional security arrangements rather than exacerbating rivalries. Encouraging multilateral frameworks could help integrate rising powers like China and India into a rules-based order that maintains freedom of navigation and energy flows.

Finally, academic and policy research should continue to monitor the evolving Sino-Indian rivalry, especially regarding its impact on regional alliances, military postures, and economic linkages. More empirical research is needed to understand how Gulf States are recalibrating their foreign policies in response to these changing dynamics.

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Overall, a combination of strategic balance, regional cooperation, economic diversification, and multilateral engagement is essential to ensure that the China-India competition in the Persian Gulf contributes to regional development rather than instability.