
India's Indo Pacific Strategy and Pakistan's Security Dilemma: A Regional Security Complex Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of India's emergence in the Indo-Pacific for Pakistan's security landscape and strategic choices. The paper takes as its starting point Darshana M. Baruah's 2020 Carnegie Endowment study, *India in the Indo Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity*, which views India's Indo Pacific pivot not as a far-flung maritime concept but as a structural change with implications for the regional order in South Asia. The study is based on two complementary theoretical approaches: Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the classical security dilemma of John Herz and Robert Jervis. RSCT places the India-Pakistan conflict at the heart of the South Asian security complex and shows how the emergence of China is entangling South Asia in a larger Asian super complex; the security dilemma explains why Indian capability-building is interpreted as an offensive by Pakistan and why the action-reaction spiral is hard to break. The paper is methodologically designed as a comparative qualitative study that compares the strategic behaviour of India and Pakistan using document and content analyses of official documents and available literature. The main thesis is that India's Indo-Pacific strategy exacerbates the material and diplomatic imbalance between the two countries, shifts the rivalry from a land centric to a maritime domain, and leaves Pakistan with limited options for a defensive strategy, including sea denial, reliance on China, and the securitization of Gwadar. The paper concludes that Pakistan's most realistic option is not a symmetric naval competition, which it cannot afford. Still, a calibrated approach of selective deterrence, economic maritime diplomacy, and risk management that will reduce, not exacerbate, the security dilemma.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the maritime domain has become the focus of great power competition. The Indian Ocean, once considered a relatively stable region in the post-Cold War era, is no longer perceived as such with the advent of the Indo-Pacific as a single theatre. India is at the center of this new geography. Today, India's role in the Indo Pacific is seen as vital by countries like Australia, Japan and the United States and New Delhi has leveraged the concept to increase its strategic presence, as well as to manage a rising China, as Darshana M. Baruah has pointed out in her 2020 Carnegie Endowment study, *India in the Indo Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity* (Baruah, 2020). Pakistan is located at the western end of the sea lines of communication of the Indian Ocean, has a long coastline along the Arabian sea, and has pinned its economic future on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the port of Gwadar. Thus, any change in the Indian Ocean order

directly falls on Pakistan's strategic doorstep. India's rise to sea power, its closer ties with the Western powers, and its capability to control the sea are changing the landscape, compelling Pakistan to think about it.

This paper has three claims.

- First, India's Indo Pacific strategy is not a departure from the India-Pakistan rivalry but rather its extension into a new maritime domain, with the structural logic of the South Asian regional security complex translated to the sea.
- Second, the imbalance between the two states is even greater at sea, where capital, technology, and partnerships are more important than on a contested land border.
- Third, the relationship between the two states is also a security dilemma: what India calls defensive and aimed at China, Islamabad reads as aimed at Pakistan, and the spiral continues, with neither side able to easily break it.

Research Question:

1. What are the implications of India's emergence in the Indo Pacific for Pakistan's security environment?
2. What are the feasible options for Pakistan to address and not to exacerbate the security dilemma?

Research Objectives:

1. To map the structural features of India's Indo Pacific strategy as defined in Baruah (2020) and corroborating sources, with a focus on partnerships, island diplomacy, and the primacy of the Indian Ocean.
2. To examine, with the help of Regional Security Complex Theory, how this strategy is related to the prevailing South Asian security complex and to the new Asian super complex.
3. To explain how Indian capability building creates insecurity in Pakistan despite its stated target being China, through the security dilemma.
4. To compare the strategic behavior of India and Pakistan and to evaluate the realistic strategic choices available to Pakistan.

Literature Review

This paper is written around Baruah's (2020) study, in which she identifies three components of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. First, the Indo-Pacific is an opportunity for India to expand its presence in a theatre where New Delhi has limited capacity and capital. Second, partnerships are at the heart of India's interests: while partnerships with Australia, France, Japan, and the United States offer a platform, wherein India's actual role will be determined by its relationship with the island states, whose foreign policy decisions affect New Delhi's security environment. Third, even with this growing canvas, the Indian Ocean will remain the main theatre for India's strategic investment (Baruah, 2020). Baruah chronicles India's journey from caution to commitment. Until Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, New Delhi was cautious of being perceived as part of a Western led Indo-Pacific containment coalition against China, with which it had fought a war in 1962, and it was hesitant even to use the term Indo Pacific (Baruah, 2020). On the military side, Baruah demonstrates that the Indian Navy is at the forefront with two instruments: the Maritime Domain Awareness, which is centered on information fusion centers and coastal radar chains in the Indian Ocean island countries, and the increased presence of the navy through Mission Based Deployments and logistics agreements, which provide access to partner facilities (Baruah, 2020).

The South Asian Security Complex

According to Buzan and Waever (2003), a regional security complex is a group of states whose core security interests are so entangled that they cannot realistically be studied in isolation from each other. One of their core cases is South Asia, a complex revolving around the rivalry between India and Pakistan, with smaller states like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh being embedded in the complex through their asymmetric dependence on India and Afghanistan acting as an insulator or sub-complex between South and Central Asia (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

Pakistan's Maritime and Strategic Posture

Analysts point out that India's maritime strategy is based on sea control. In contrast, Pakistan is based on sea denial, and the disparity between the two navies in terms of carriers, surveillance, undersea warfare, and platform numbers is widening (The Friday Times, 2025). Pakistan codified its thinking in the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan, which considers the security of Gwadar and its seaward approaches a fundamental responsibility of the navy and views the induction of advanced platforms into the Indian Ocean as a destabilizing trend (Global Village Space, 2021; CIMSEC, 2024). This stream also reflects Pakistan's central issue regarding Gwadar and CPEC. Gwadar is the maritime hinge of CPEC and a major geo-economic asset. However, Indian and some Western analysts see it as a potential Chinese naval base, drawing attention and risking Pakistan's involvement in great power rivalry, while over-militarizing the port could also compromise its commercial value (The Friday Times, 2025). In this way, the literature depicts Pakistan as facing a dilemma between geo-economic opportunity and geo-strategic vulnerability.

Literature Gap

When read together, these streams leave a clear gap. The Indo-Pacific literature is India-centric and partner centric, and hardly theorizes the implications for Pakistan. The RSCT literature sets the structural centrality of the India-Pakistan dyad and the emerging super complex, but does not do so specifically about the maritime turn. Pakistani maritime literature is descriptive and under theorized, documenting asymmetry and the Gwadar dilemma. This paper stands at the intersection in theoretical terms: it explains how India's Indo-Pacific rise changes Pakistan's options, using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the security dilemma, and it does so through a structured comparison of the behaviour of both states.

Theoretical Framework

The paper uses two frameworks in combination. Regional Security Complex Theory provides the structural map, showing the location of the actors and how their security concerns are connected. The security dilemma provides the behavioral mechanism, which is to say, why, with that structure, capability building leads to insecurity and an action-reaction spiral.

Regional Security Complex Theory

A regional security complex is a set of states whose securitization processes are so interwoven that their security issues can only be solved in concert. Four elements of the theory support this paper. First, the South Asian complex is focused on India-Pakistan hostility, which influences almost all other security relations in South Asia. Second, there is high security interdependence in the complex: even small shifts in one state's capabilities elicit large responses from the other. Third, the complex has been shifting from a rough bipolarity to unipolarity, with India becoming stronger and Pakistan becoming relatively weaker. Fourth, the emergence of China is creating a centre of gravity that brings South Asia into closer contact with East Asia, thereby creating an emergent Asian super complex (Buzan, 2011). If applied to the Indo-Pacific, RSCT provides an accurate prediction. The eastward

and maritime expansion of India is not an exit from the South Asian complex but rather the visible edge of the super complex taking shape. India's investments in maritime domain awareness, island partnerships, and naval presence in the Indian Ocean increase its comparative capability in the complex. In the logic of intense interdependence, Pakistan has to react. The stage of the conflict has expanded from land to sea, and its nature remains the same. RSCT also sheds light on an aspect of India's strategy that is indirectly but importantly relevant to Pakistan: the role of the smaller Indian Ocean island states. Baruah gives considerable attention to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles, asserting that their foreign policy decisions directly impact India's security environment and that competition over their alignment is part of the maritime competition (Baruah, 2020). In RSCT parlance, these are the orbiting units of the complex, which are asymmetrically dependent on India yet also wooed by a great external power. Although Pakistan is not one of these orbiting island states, the dynamic is relevant to Pakistan in two ways. First, it takes up a significant portion of India's limited maritime focus and resources, which the conclusion characterizes as pertinent to Pakistan's room for manoeuvre. Second, it shows the template through which China challenges India's regional dominance and the template of CPEC and Gwadar on India's western flank. In this reading, Pakistan is the western analog of the eastern island contest: the location where the China-India competition for position in the Indian Ocean is at its most concentrated.

The Security Dilemma

The security dilemma, first identified by John Herz and elaborated by Robert Jervis, is a situation in which actions that a state takes to enhance its security, such as arming or forming alliances, reduce the security of other states, which in turn take measures to enhance their security, and so on, leaving all states less secure than they were at the outset, even though none of them were trying to be aggressive (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Two refinements are important here. First, Jervis (1978) emphasized that it is not objective capability that causes the spiral, but the perception of it. Second, the dilemma is structurally related to anarchy: When there is no higher authority to ensure restraint, states must assume the worst about capabilities even when they are uncertain about intentions. Both refinements have a direct bearing on the maritime relations between India and Pakistan. Platforms designed and justified for sea control against China are in India, from Islamabad's point of view, indistinguishable from platforms that can be used against Pakistan. In the anarchic South Asian environment, Pakistan cannot prudently assume that capability will never be turned against it.

The Two Frameworks in Integration

The integration is simple. According to RSCT, India and Pakistan are now in a "complex of intense interdependence" that has now moved into a "maritime super complex. The security dilemma explains what occurs in that structure when one side's capabilities increase: the other side sees them as threatening, triggers a response, and a spiral ensues. The Indo-Pacific is the setting in which the structural prediction of RSCT (widening arena, growing asymmetry) and the behavioural prediction of the security dilemma (perception-driven escalation) meet. The rest of the paper is essentially a test of the validity of these predictions against observed behaviour in India and Pakistan.

Element	Regional Security Complex Theory	Security Dilemma
Level of analysis	Structure of the region	Interaction between two states
Key claim used	South Asian complex centered on India-Pakistan; emerging Asian super complex via China's rise	Defensive capability is read as offensive; perception drives an action-reaction spiral.
Indo-Pacific	India's maritime expansion is the	Indian sea-control capability

application	visible edge of the super-complex arena of rivalry that widens to the sea.	provokes Pakistani sea-denial and Chinese alignment responses.
Prediction for Pakistan	Growing relative weakness inside a unipolarising complex	Pressure to respond despite inability to match; risk of a costly, self-defeating spiral

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in this paper is comparative qualitative. The strategic behaviour of India and Pakistan is compared across a fixed set of dimensions, making the similarities and differences apparent against common criteria. Qualitative comparison is suitable because the research question concerns meaning, perception, and strategic intent, which cannot be reduced to quantitative measures.

Analysis and Discussion

Indo-Pacific Rise as Structural Change in the Complex

Baruah's core argument, that the Indo Pacific is a change in India's strategic landscape from just its land borders to its maritime domain, is a description of structural change in the South Asian complex (Baruah, 2020). The India Pakistan rivalry has been overwhelmingly continental in nature historically: the disputed land border, Kashmir, and the nuclear dyad. Baruah said that the maritime domain was largely beyond the scope of India's strategic thinking. The Indo Pacific pivot places the ocean at the heart of India's strategy. Read through RSCT, 3 consequences follow. Initially, the arena of the complex expands. The same animosity that fuels the land rivalry now finds a maritime dimension, and Pakistan is now fighting for a disputed border and its seaward approaches. Second, the asymmetry is accentuated. India's capital, technology, and diplomatic outreach in the form of force multipliers partnerships with Australia, France, Japan, and the United States, its Maritime Domain Awareness architecture, and its logistics access to partner facilities are all areas in which India's lead is significant and increasing, and Pakistan cannot match. Third, the external boundary of the complex becomes porous: India serves as the channel through which the East Asian and South Asian complexes connect, just as Buzan envisioned (Buzan, 2011).

However, there is a significant caveat that favours the analytical side in Pakistan. Baruah admits that India is facing capacity and capital constraints, that many flagship projects, such as the Asia Africa Growth Corridor, have yielded few results, and that the Indian Navy receives a small allocation of the defense budget (Baruah, 2020). India's structural advantage is real but not unlimited, and its attention is spread thin across a vast theatre. This is significant for Pakistan's choices, as the conclusion will suggest that the asymmetry is significant, but India's bandwidth in the western Indian Ocean, closest to Pakistan, is limited.

Comparative Analysis: Indian and Pakistani Strategic Behavior

The five-dimensional comparison is summarised in Figure 2

Dimension	India	Pakistan
Strategic geography	Expanding outward, the Indian Ocean is primary, extending across the Indo-Pacific from Africa to the Pacific.	Concentrated on the northern Arabian Sea, the Makran coast, and the seaward approaches to Gwadar
Naval doctrine	Sea control: presence, domain awareness, power projection	Sea denial; deterrence by raising the cost of an adversary's sea

		control
Partnership/alignment	Multiple major-power partners (US, Japan, France, Australia) plus island diplomacy; avoids formal alliance.	Deep but largely single-partner dependence on China; narrower diplomatic bandwidth
Economic-maritime stakes	Vast trade and energy SLOCs; global ambition; net security provider role	CPEC and Gwadar are concentrated, high-value, high-vulnerability assets
Threat perception	Primary concern is China; Pakistan is a secondary, managed threat	The primary concern is India; it reads Indian capability as directed against itself

Strategic Geography

The orientation is very asymmetric. India has a broad definition of theatre and can consider the Indian Ocean as one node in a global strategy. Pakistan's maritime interests are focused and defensive, with a coastline of about 1,000 kilometers and in the approaches to Gwadar (Eurasia Review, 2024). This is the contrast between a rising power expanding its vision and a threatened power maintaining the status quo to protect a small but critical area.

Naval Doctrine

The doctrinal contrast is a perfect fit for the material asymmetry. India's objective is sea control, the ability to use the sea and deny its use to others, which means carriers, large surface fleets, and surveillance. Pakistan's strategy is to adopt a sea denial approach, which is less expensive and does not aim to control the sea but to make it costly and risky for an adversary to command it. It relies on submarines, anti-ship missiles, and asymmetric tactics (The Friday Times, 2025). Sea denial is the rational doctrine of the weaker naval power, and Pakistan's embrace of it is itself proof of the asymmetry that the structural analysis foretells. There is a deeper strategic logic to the doctrinal asymmetry that warrants teasing out. Sea control and sea denial are not just different budgets for doing the same thing; they are different theories of victory. Sea control is the idea that control of the maritime commons can be achieved and used to project power, impose a blockade, and protect one's own commerce. Sea denial assumes that command cannot be achieved and aims to prevent the enemy from achieving it, and that one's own use of the sea will be challenged. This has a sobering implication for Pakistan: a sea-denial posture can make an Indian blockade or coercive presence more costly, but it cannot ensure Pakistan's own freedom of maritime commerce in wartime, as exposed by Gwadar and the energy SLOCs. Sea denial is the right doctrine for Pakistan's means, but it is a doctrine of imposing costs, not of assured access, and that is the strategic cost of the asymmetry.

Partnership and Alignment

Baruah demonstrates that partnerships are the key to India's approach, and that India has been actively seeking to diversify its partnerships, wooing the U.S., Japan, France, Australia, the European Union, the Gulf states, and the island nations, while shunning any single binding partnership (Baruah, 2020). By contrast, Pakistan has been focused on China in its strategic dependence on CPEC. Diversification provides India with resilience and bargaining power; concentration provides Pakistan with depth in one relationship and fragility in the others. It binds its fate to the China dimension of the super complex.

Economic Maritime Stakes

India is protecting diffuse, global stakes; Pakistan is protecting concentrated, local stakes. Concentration is a two-way street. It clarifies Pakistan's interests and, in theory, makes them easier to threaten, making them more salient as objects of deterrence. Gwadar is Pakistan's biggest maritime opportunity and at the same time its biggest maritime vulnerability (The Friday Times, 2025).

Threat Perception

The last dimension is the location of the security dilemma. India's stated main concern is China, and Pakistan is a secondary and manageable threat in Indian parlance. However, what Pakistan sees as Indian capabilities is directed at it. This disconnect in perception, India looking east, Pakistan watching India, is the driving force of the spiral that is analyzed next.

The Security Dilemma at Sea

The maritime ties between India and Pakistan meet the classic criteria of an acute security dilemma. First, there is no difference between offensive and defensive capabilities: a frigate, a submarine, or a maritime patrol aircraft acquired for sea control against China can be used against Pakistan, and Pakistan cannot take Indian acquisitions as benign even if New Delhi is genuinely acquiring them for the China contingency (Jervis, 1978). Second, the situation is anarchic, and the competition has been around for a long time, so it is prudent for Pakistan to assume the worst about how capabilities could be used. Third, and ultimately, it is a perception game: what counts is how the other side interprets one's intentions, and the maritime aspect has been a significant part of Pakistan's perception of threat, as Jervis pointed out, in the 1971 war (The Friday Times, 2025). The spiral then runs as follows. India's sea control capability and partnerships, primarily against China. Since Pakistan cannot tell the difference between these and anti Pakistan capabilities, and cannot match them, it responds by strengthening sea denial and by getting closer to China, the only partner that can balance the Indian advantage. That response, in turn, seems to confirm the Indian and Western narrative that Gwadar and the China relationship are strategic, not just commercial, which brings Pakistan under greater scrutiny and bolsters India's own balancing (The Friday Times, 2025). The defensive step on each side is a rational response to the other's, and all become more militarised and less secure, although India's eyes are on Beijing rather than Islamabad. Two aspects of this dilemma make it particularly difficult to resolve. The first is the China factor: Pakistan's natural reaction to India's strength is to align with China, and India's Indo Pacific strategy is a reaction to China, so the India Pakistan dilemma is embedded in the India China dilemma. Super-complex-level and dyadic-level movements support each other. The second is the difficulty of credible reassurance. In the absence of trusted communication and given the dyad's history, neither side can easily signal that a given capability is not intended for the other, so the perceptual mechanism runs unchecked.

Escalation and Nuclear Backdrop

The India-Pakistan maritime dilemma needs to be understood in the context of the nuclear dimension, which sets this dyad apart from many others. Both countries are nuclear powers, and the stability paradox, which posits that strategic nuclear deterrence can make limited conventional war more likely, has long been talked about in the South Asian context. A new and underexplored dimension may be the maritime domain. The sea is not only a part of the conventional strategic balance, but as both navies develop more capable platforms and the survivability of nuclear forces becomes increasingly dependent on the sea, the maritime arena becomes part of the strategic balance. This entanglement has two effects on the security dilemma. First, sea-based capabilities with implications for the survivability of second-strike forces are especially destabilizing, since they directly impact the most sensitive aspect of the deterrence relationship and are difficult to interpret as defensive. Second, the maritime domain provides more opportunities for ambiguous, deniable, and gradual

encounters, shadowing, incidents at sea, contested presence near chokepoints, etc., than a fortified land border does. Thus, the risk that a localized maritime incident could escalate through misperception is greater. This risk is heightened by the lack of strong maritime crisis management mechanisms between the two states. The escalation backdrop thus reinforces the paper's core message: Pakistan's focus should not be on winning a game it cannot win, but on managing a dilemma whose consequences are catastrophic and whose drivers are more numerous and more ambiguous in the maritime sphere than in the terrestrial one.

Gwadar and CPEC

Gwadar is an empirical intersection of structure, asymmetry, and the security dilemma. In terms of its structure, it is the maritime anchor of CPEC and the most apparent manifestation of Pakistan's China orientation in the new super complex (Eurasia Review, 2024; CIMSEC, 2024). In terms of asymmetry, it concentrates a large share of economic value in a single, geographically vulnerable spot on the Makran coast, close to the Strait of Hormuz and the energy SLOCs of the northern Arabian Sea. Security-dilemma-wise, the object whose meaning is disputed: Pakistan claims it is a commercial port, while Indian and some Western analysts see it as a potential Chinese naval base (The Friday Times, 2025). This challenge puts Pakistan in a real dilemma. Gwadar needs a naval and special-forces presence, as clearly stated in Pakistan's Maritime Doctrine (Global Village Space, 2021). However, making the port look militarised lends credibility to the basic story, heightens suspicions about great power interests, and may discourage commercial traffic, which is the economic value of Gwadar (The Friday Times, 2025). There is no free lunch, and that is what the security dilemma suggests when the asset is concentrated, has two meanings, and is in the hands of the weaker party in an intense complex. Gwadar internationalizes Pakistan's security problem: it entangles Islamabad's choices with Beijing's, brings Washington and the Gulf into the picture, and puts a once-bilateral rivalry into a multi-actor maritime competition. That internationalization is most profound when India's Indo-Pacific rise alters Pakistan's strategic choices, not only by shifting the balance of forces but also by increasing the number of players whose choices affect Pakistan's security.

Analysis

The analysis yields five findings, each related to the frameworks and the comparison.

1. The Indo-Pacific is an extension of the South Asian rivalry. The maritime turn is not a solution to the structural enmity of the South Asian complex; it only takes it out to sea. The arena expands from the land to the maritime domain, and the underlying interdependence remains the same (Baruah, 2020; Buzan & Waever, 2003).
2. Asymmetry is magnified at sea. The land balance is already in India's favour, and at sea, where capital, technology, and partnerships are key, the gap is even wider and widening, as India's sea control and Pakistan's sea denial are doctrinally stated (The Friday Times, 2025; Baruah, 2020).
3. A nested security dilemma is in play. Indian capability created for China is the same capability that can be used against Pakistan; this perceptual mechanism creates a spiral as Pakistan's rational response to this is to increase its sea denial and to move closer to China, which further reinforces the very narratives that increase its insecurity (Jervis, 1978; The Friday Times, 2025).
4. The key difference is between diversification and dependence. India's multiple-partner approach provides resilience and leverage, while Pakistan's focus on China provides depth but also fragility, and entangles its rivalry in the larger super complex (Baruah, 2020).
5. Gwadar internationalizes the security issue of Pakistan. The most significant shift in Pakistan's strategic landscape is the involvement of multiple external players through the

Pakistan's Strategic Options

The paper suggest that symmetric competition is not the appropriate reaction. Pakistan cannot afford a sea control race, and trying to do so will only help to perpetuate the spiral. The frameworks instead gesture towards a posture that can manage the dilemma rather than accentuate it. Four possibilities follow, presented as analytically derived rather than endorsements, and each has trade offs.

Sea Denial Not Symmetric Competition

The rational doctrine for the weaker navy is to increase credible sea denial, submarines, shore-based anti-ship capability, mines, and domain awareness to the point where the cost of any sea control operation by an adversary is raised, and to abandon the idea of matching surface fleets explicitly. This maintains deterrence at an affordable cost and signals limited, defensive intent, which slightly reduces the dilemma.

The Perceptual Spiral is reduced.

As the dilemma is perception-driven, measures to enhance transparency, communication, maritime confidence building measures, understanding of incidents at sea, and clear signaling of the commercial purpose of Gwadar can help reduce tensions without changing the material balance. These are low-cost moves with asymmetric upside, but they need a willing counterpart and are subject to political shocks.

Reducing, Not Increasing, Dependence

The analysis indicates that increasing reliance on a single partner makes it more vulnerable and contributes to the strategic base narrative of Gwadar. Pakistan's interest is to diversify its maritime economic ties with the Gulf states, other Indian Ocean littorals, and, via multilateral maritime forums, to avoid being held hostage to a single relationship. This is hard to do, especially in the case of CPEC, but it is important to know the direction of travel.

Foregrounding the Blue Economy

Framing Gwadar and the broader maritime zone as a commercial and blue economy project, as done in the second edition of the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan and the National Security Policy framework (CIMSEC, 2024), achieves two things: it captures real economic value, and it works against the militarised reading that exacerbates the security dilemma. Economic salience can be a security strategy if it reduces others' threat perception.

Conclusion

India's emergence in the Indo-Pacific is not an event outside Pakistan's security; rather, it is a structural shift in the South Asian regional security complex from a land-centric rivalry to a maritime one, and one that is now part of an emerging Asian supercomplex. Read through Regional Security Complex Theory, India's maritime expansion will expand the field of the rivalry, increase an already vast asymmetry, and render the boundaries of the South Asian complex porous to East Asian dynamics. The security dilemma is that the same capabilities India is building against China are, by the logic of indistinguishability and perception, felt in Pakistan as being built against itself. This action-reaction spiral is nested within the larger India-China contest and materially and symbolically converges on Gwadar. The comparative analysis reveals two states acting in structurally predictable ways: a rising power diversifying its partnerships and seeking sea control in an expanding theatre,

and a weaker, status quo-challenged power focusing on dependence, sea denial, and the defense of a narrow but vital maritime space. The difference between Indian diversification and Pakistani dependence is key, and the shift with the most implications is the internationalization of Pakistan's once-bilateral security issue. The strategic implication is obvious. Pakistan has no choice but to live with its structural position, but it can either magnify or control the security dilemma. It would be magnified at an unaffordable cost if it were to be pursued in a symmetric naval competition. By contrast, a posture of calibrated sea denial, perceptual de-escalation, managed rather than deepened dependence, and a blue-economy framing of Gwadar would maintain deterrence while reducing the temperature. The Indo-Pacific has altered the playing field on which Pakistan operates; the analysis here indicates that it is not a question of matching India ship for ship, but of playing the weaker hand with discipline and not allowing the spiral that the nature of the region makes almost inevitable to take hold.

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