
INDO-US Geostrategic Partnership in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Pakistan's Maritime Security (2020-2025)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.2633>

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the Indo-US geostrategic partnership in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has developed from 2020 to 2025, and the implications of this partnership for Pakistan's security, diplomacy and regional strategy. Individual aspects of the relationship have been covered in various literature, such as defence cooperation, the Quad, CPEC, and Pakistan's naval modernisation but the developments have not been arranged in a chronological fashion in one single piece of literature in a single theoretical framework. This study is designed with a qualitative research approach employing document and content analysis techniques of primary sources (bilateral agreements like BECA, LEMOA, COMCASA; official documents of strategy; government statements) and secondary sources (peer-reviewed literature and think-tank reports) from 2020 to mid-2025. The analysis is based on a "theory of theories", which is a combination of two theories, one for Indo-US relationship and the second for Pakistan's response, which is neorealism and neorealism hedging theory, respectively. The findings show that while 2020-2025 is a qualitative consolidation of Indo-US cooperation, it is an offensive-realist logic that is present in these instruments on the American side, and a defensive-realist and capability-without-commitment posture on the Indian side, as seen in instruments such as BECA (2020), the Quad Leaders' Summit (2021), AUKUS (2021), and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022). This consolidation has tilted the balance of power in India's favour, while at the same time, Pakistan's diplomatic marginalisation (membership in IORA), deterrence concerns, and economic dependence on China, have all worsened. Pakistan's reaction is not passive drift, but is consistent hedge: naval modernisation, indifference towards Washington and Beijing as well as regional diversification through the Gulf and smaller states of IOR, but comes at a cost: security for CPEC and exclusion from regional institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Great-power competition in the twenty-first century increasingly runs through water rather than land, and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) sits at the centre of that shift. It is the connecting tissue of seaborne trade between Asia, Africa and Australia and has become a strategic priority for the United States, India and China (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021; Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). For the better part of the last 20 years, the US-India relationship in this arena has followed the contours of the geographies of the region — its chokepoints, trade routes and energy corridors — without changing the balance of power. This was to change from 2020 to 2025 though, when the partnership reached an extent that influenced alliance networks, defence strategies and maritime rivalries in the IOR, and had a direct impact on Pakistan.

The Indian Ocean Region

In fact, three features account for the current interest in this ocean. The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world, representing nearly one-fifth of the oceans surface at around 68.5–73.5 million square kilometres and is home to several chokepoints that account for more than 80% of the seaborne trade of oil to and from the rest of the world, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021; Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). Secondly resources: almost 17% of the world's oil reserves, over 1/4 of global gas reserves, and some of the world's fastest growing economies and most productive fishing grounds (Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). Third, timing: Historically, strategic competition has been concentrated in the Atlantic and Pacific, with the Indian Ocean being rather far removed — a situation that has been gradually changing as both trade and energy security have drawn competing powers to the Indian Ocean (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021).

This geography is interpreted differently by each of the big powers. The issues that are of primary importance for Washington are freedom of navigation in the Hormuz-Malacca-Suez corridor, non-proliferation, and a partnership with India to counter Chinese rise (Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). Beijing, that imports majority of its oil from IOR and about 50% of its gas from the same region, but has comparatively less developed navy, has instead worked towards securing the sea-lanes through port investment as part of the Belt and Road Initiative – Gwadar included (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021; Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). In contrast, the region's biggest littoral country of 7,500 km coastlines has taken a different approach, building up its navy and extending its port access to gain recognition as the region's net security provider (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021).

None of these strategies seem to fit in Pakistan. Though it has a very small coastline of approximately 1,000 km and an exclusive economic zone of approximately 240,000 km², however, its sea-borne trade is close to 95% of its trade (Institute of Policy Studies, 2016; Pakistan Civil Services Academy, 2025). Moreover, it is not present in the main cooperative forum of the region, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which is an intergovernmental body comprising of 23 member countries, focusing on maritime safety and cooperation in the fields of trade and blue economy (Indian Ocean Rim Association, n.d.; Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022; Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021). What results is a state whose economic well-being is tied to the very waters that great-power rivalry, Chinese investment and geography at the mouth of the Gulf has made contested, but without a seat at the table where those rules are determined (Bragta, 2022). The high level of exposure coupled with low institutional voice in Pakistan is exactly why it is a useful case for tracing the experience of changes in the Indo-US partnership, rather than its shaping.

The Indo-US Relations in IOR

The security aspect of the US–India relationship has been in existence prior to the time frame covered in this thesis, but the evolution of the relationship has influenced how we should interpret changes after 2020. Institutional foundations were established in the 2008 civil nuclear deal in the framework of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2008) and in 2015, with a Joint Strategic Vision Statement, both countries pledged to freedom of navigation and to managing China's rise (The White House, 2015). In 2016, a second agreement, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement and in 2018 a third agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, were signed, expanding the scope to include technology-sharing and reciprocal basing access.

Whereas events of 2020–2025 will be marked not so much by the emergence of new types of cooperation as by the speeding up and consolidation of existing ones, that is, by the development of an operational partnership. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, signed in October 2020, has now brought the four foundational agreements to full fruition, and allowed the two militaries to exchange geospatial intelligence directly relevant to maritime operations (Amir, 2024, Amir, Karim, & Kayani, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). The cooperation expanded to include intelligence sharing and capability

development with joint initiatives, including a 2021 agreement on the development of air launched cruise missiles, a 2023 agreement on cooperation in standoff missiles and the India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) launched in June 2023, connecting private sector defence innovation (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). India's parallel procurement of P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft is similar to the unilaterally adopted approach of constructing the platforms required to impact a more significant ocean presence.

The minilateral level saw this bilateral consolidation, as well. Washington's commitment to a free and rules-based Indo-Pacific in March 2021 was followed by the Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2022, which solidified the idea of India as a security partner and committed to it to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean in particular (The White House, 2021a; 2022; Tariq & Arshad, 2022). These did not take place without geographical context, rather, they superimposed on an existing basing footprint in the U.S. in the Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, UAE) and a newer one in the Indian basing footprint, which stretched from Duqm and Sabang to Réunion and Diego Garcia, creating two rings of access along the length of the IOR (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, UAE) (Kasim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022; Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021).

These developments collectively represent a qualitative change from the two-decade trend of technology access and diplomatic signalling to interoperable, technology-integrated maritime capability, not only because of Beijing's own push to build infrastructure in the region, but also owing to each state's shared interest in expanding the potential of India as the predominant balancing force in the region (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021). The Indo-US partnership is a relatively inexpensive option for Washington to counter Beijing's strength in the Indian Ocean; for India, it's a technological, intelligence and diplomatic weapon that allows New Delhi to go far beyond South Asia (Amir, 2024).

The Implications of these Dynamics for Pakistan

In Pakistan's case, it does not just represent an abstract regional trend, but a series of real security, diplomatic and economic challenges. In terms of security, the geospatial-intelligence sharing with BECA would sharpen India's precision-strike and missile-defence capabilities, one of which would make an Indian strike more precise, and the other would make Pakistan's second-strike calculations more difficult, thus compromising the credibility of Pakistan's minimum deterrence posture (Amir, 2024). In security-dilemma parlance, the Indian responses to make themselves feel more secure put additional pressure on Pakistan to respond in kind, yet with a low probability of a full-scale war. (Amir, 2024)

Pakistan's exclusion from regional forums further exacerbates this situation, diplomatically. It has not yet joined the Indian Ocean Rim Association and its anti-terrorism ties with Washington since 2001 have not been evident in the establishment of cooperative arrangements anchored by India (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021). It has been lacking in its own approach to the Indian Ocean compared to ongoing developments in the region: the 2018 Indian Ocean Policy remains on paper and has not seen the kind of operational strategy developed by India and China (Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022). Competing infrastructure investments further highlighted this picture in 2021, as both Chabahar port, in Iran, and Gwadar port, in China, served as alternative trade routes to Afghanistan and Central Asian markets (Amir, 2024); and at the same time, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan eliminated the principal practical foundation for U.S.-Pakistan cooperation, while simultaneously providing Islamabad with a bit more room to manoeuvre without it. (Iqbal, 2020).

The increasing disparity in military and technology capabilities with India has placed pressure on the Pakistani economy, which has to balance military capabilities with development priorities such as the finance of CPEC projects (Amir, 2024). These security, diplomatic, and economic challenges are being seen as a sign of a bipolar shift in the region, with a Washington–New Delhi and Beijing–Islamabad linkage (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021). It must be recalled that the geographic location of Pakistan at the mouth of the Gulf, the economic reliance on China and the strategic competition with India are not three pressures that incidentally overlap but

are three pressures that reinforce each other (Bragta, 2022).

Pakistan's response to the changing dynamics.

In Pakistan's reaction, military hedging, deterrence-signalling and diplomatic balancing have been pursued instead of a pure choice between the two powers. The military side has been investing in opportunities to modernise its forces with Chinese-built Type 054A/P frigates and the Hangor-class submarines (four built in China and four assembled under technology transfer), to sign a deal in 2016 for eight more Yuan-class submarines, and the Sea Guardian naval exercise, all focused on reducing the capability gap with India, and the Gwadar-CPEC sea line in particular (Amir, 2024; Quwa, 2024; Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022).

Diplomatically, Islamabad has refrained from either taking a strong stance against Washington or Beijing: A stance that is anti-American is impractical if Pakistan still has economic and diplomatic ties with the US, and distancing itself from China is equally impractical, given that Beijing is Islamabad's primary military and infrastructure backer (Naomi, Zaidi & Saud, 2021). This balancing act is complemented by diversification - closer relations with the Gulf states, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives, and greater multinational exercises like the biennial AMAN drills, which have been conducted since 2007, and in 2025 saw more than 60 navies participate, including the U.S, China and Iran (Dawn, 2025), while at the same time India is diversifying its own relationships with the Gulf states (Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022; Amir, 2024). In this regard, Pakistan has also intermittently indicated a desire to move away from reliance on external security guarantees towards a security model that is based on the economic stability and reform of its domestic governance (Tariq & Arshad, 2022).

This is disputed whether or not it is a coherent strategy. Regional analysts tend to describe these as reactive responses to the situation, instead of an integrated, proactive Indian Ocean policy, which this thesis will revisit in the discussion of what would be needed for a strategic hedge (Karim, Kayani, & Bukhari, 2022; Bragta, 2022).

1.1 Significance of the Study

In the majority of the discussions around Indo-US partnership, Pakistan is an afterthought. It is most frequently found in a closing paragraph, typically as a casualty. The actions in Washington and New Delhi that shape a country's deterrence posture, trade routes and diplomatic posture should be studied from the perspective of the country rather than being treated as a secondary issue in analyses of another country. This thesis attempts to do that. It places Pakistan at the heart of the discussion and not the periphery, and it adopts a theoretical framework developed to describe these issues — state reactions to unexpected power changes over which they have little control.

There's a practical aspect too. Policymakers in Islamabad can no longer afford to wait for a consensus within the scholarly community before taking action; they now have to discern the complex dynamic between BECA, INDUS-X, the Quad and the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, as well as how it relates to Pakistan's preferred options. There are very few studies that bring these threads together in one. Even fewer span the period between 2020 and 2025 – the time in which these agreements became reality. Since this is a study of a more recent period, it also seeks to offer a resource beyond an academic exercise—one that illustrates for the researchers and the policy-readers what has changed and its implications for Pakistan's strategic considerations

Research Objectives

- To track the development of Indo-US geostrategic partnership in IOR region from 2020 to 2025.
- To analyse the changing power dynamics and strategic competition in the Indian Ocean Region with the growing Indo-US partnership.

- To evaluate the implications of these developments for Pakistan's security, diplomacy, economy and regional strategy.
- To evaluate Pakistan's policy responses to the evolving Indo-US partnership and to identify the strengths, limitations and gaps in that response.

Research Questions

- 1) What has been the development of Indo-USA geostrategic partnership in the Indian Ocean Region since 2020 till 2025?
- 2) What effect has this had on the power and security dynamics in IOR?
- 3) What are implications of Indo-US partnership for Pakistan security, diplomatic and economic interests.
- 4) What was Pakistan's reaction to these developments and was it adequate to protect Pakistan's strategic interests?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This chapter draws the theoretical framework that is used to analyse the Indo-US geostrategic partnership in IOR and its impacts on Pakistan. There are two theories used. The first one is neorealism, which we will study in terms of its two main versions: offensive realism, and defensive realism. The second is hedging theory, a middle power alignment theory which has emerged more recently, largely independently from neorealism but which can be assimilated into it. The chapter is divided in two parts. Part One provides explanations of the theories. In Part Two, they are applied to the Indo-US strategic relationship (neorealism) and Pakistan's response (hedging theory). The chapter concludes with a justification of this combination and a linkage to the analytical chapters to come.

Neorealism: Core Premises

The book “Theory of International Politics” is the formalisation of Neorealism (structural realism). Waltz rejected the classical realism focus on human nature and found the explanations of state action in the structure of the international system. According to him, the system is “anarchic.” There is no higher authority to impose regulation or assure protection over the state. Thus, states have no one but themselves to turn to for their security, which realists describe as self-help (Waltz, 1979).

This starting point leads to three structural features which are important for the interpretation of Indo-US cooperation and Pakistan's reaction to it in this thesis. First, states are the primary players in international politics and their actions are governed more by their place in the power structure than by any ideology or personality of the leaders. Secondly, survival is the number one objective of any state; other objectives — prosperity, ideology, prestige — are considered after survival is reasonably assured. Third, intentions are hard to test and may shift rapidly, so states are inclined to evaluate based on ability. A state's military build-up is interpreted as a threat, regardless of the explanations given (Waltz, 1979).

This structural logic is what makes neorealism such a broadly received movement, even though it is set during the Cold War. It's not necessary to be familiar with the ideology of any given government in order to predict behavior; all that's necessary is familiarity with the relative power and geography. Hence, this was well suited to the study of the IOR during the 2020-25 timeline period, when most of the observed realignment in the region was driven by relative naval capability.

Neorealists differ on the amount of power that's sufficient. This disagreement resulted in the two variants mentioned below. This disagreement gave rise to the two variants mentioned below.

Offensive Realism

In his book *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer builds on Waltz's ideas and comes up with a

tougher proposition: offensive realism. Mearsheimer's theory is built on five assumptions: the international system is anarchic; all great powers have some offensive military capability; states can never be certain of other states' intentions; survival is the primary goal of state; and states are rational decision makers, meaning they plan strategically to survive (Mearsheimer, 2001).

From this point, Mearsheimer concludes that Waltz's take is more optimistic than his own. Rational states cannot rely on "enough power" because they can never know what others will do, and because the cost of underestimating other's hostility can be fatal. It has to obtain as much power as it can; more power is better than less. Offensive realism, therefore, is the view that great-power relations are primarily dominated by rational pursuit of regional hegemony within an anarchic system (Mearsheimer, 2001). On this interpretation, it is the aim of a great power to make sure that no other great power takes over its territory.

It is to the two characteristics of offensive realism that are particularly pertinent here. The first is the way it views the rise of powers: a state that is getting stronger is supposed to exert regional dominance; status quo powers are supposed to oppose the conversion of the greater power before the greater power consolidates. Mearsheimer uses this argument literally to explain why he thinks a more assertive China is going to want to dominate Asia and the U.S., the current power, is going to do everything possible to stop it (2001). The second is that it focuses on regional rather than global, hegemony as its unit of analysis. This places the theory in a special position, in that it is far more apt to a study of a region, the Indian Ocean, than to the international system per se, because offensive realism would suggest that great-power competition would be heightened in those areas where the reach of the rising power and the interests of the status-quo power intersect.

This thesis will adopt offensive realism to explain the level of Indo-US cooperation – why so much more cooperation in terms of pace and intensity after 2020, and why the United States has been willing to give India access to some of their most sensitive military technology.

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism is based on the premise of neorealism that states operate in an anarchic environment, but differs from offensive realism in that it argues for the limitation of power. Offensive realism suggests that states aim to maximise power and to dominate, when they can, and defensive realism suggests that states seek power which is just sufficient to ensure their survival, not more (Waltz 1979, Mearsheimer 2001). As with so many other areas, Kenneth Waltz is the starting point here as well, but the variant has been considerably improved by later scholars, specifically Charles Glaser.

Signalling is the only refinement that is of significance. Glaser contends that a state that intentionally restricts its offensive options – either by unilateral restraint or arms control or by defensively posture its acquisition and procurement – can tell other states that it is security-seeking rather than expansionist, and that this can lower the risk of it falling into a security dilemma or into an arms race (Glaser, 1994/95). The other states cannot know whether the state is building up offensive military strength for security or for expansion. Such uncertainty heightens mistrust and the danger of a security dilemma. This opposition between signalling through restraint and signalling through accumulation is pivotal in the understanding of India's posture in Part Two of this theoretical framework.

Defensive realism also gives more weight to what offensive realism is less likely to have an answer to: why states do not always respond to threat in the most maximalistic manner. The defensive realist view is that in general, going over the top in terms of security needs is self-defeating, meaning that other country states will counterbalance a country that appears to be aggressive and that "aggression has the tendency to weaken the position of a state" (Waltz, 1979). This is a theoretical statement, which is exactly the type of behavior witnessed in the Indian relations with the U.S. since 2020: extensive defence and intelligence cooperation but never a formal alliance. In short, defensive realism provides the vocabulary that this thesis requires to explain restraint, and offensive realism is hard pressed to find any alternatives to that vocabulary.

Hedging Theory

Neorealism, both versions, was constructed to account for the great power behaviour. It has little to say on how smaller and middle powers behave when caught between two bigger ones – a space that is directly relevant to Pakistan in this thesis. To address this, hedging theory was created.

According to Cheng-Chwee BE, hedging is a form of insurance-seeking behavior in situations of high uncertainty and high stakes where the rational state of affairs tries to take counteracting measures to the competitors that are able to maintain a fallback position (Kuik, 2021). It has three characteristics: First, it is associated with the lack of alignment between adversaries, or to the pursuit of measures that are at odds with each other to manage multiple risks in parallel; and third, to the deliberate diversification of partners in order to build up alternative alliances when one is disrupted or weakened (Kuik, 2021). This definition is important since it clearly separates hedging from the two classical options in realist theory: balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging is neither. It is a deliberately maintained middle position, not a result of indecision but a rational strategy when there is uncertainty.

Another, but different, contribution is from John Ciorciari's idea of "limited alignment." The belief of classical alignment theory, which Ciorciari disputes, is that states threatened by insecurity have only three options: balance against the threat, bandwagon with the threat, or proclaim strict neutrality. However, he posits that developing countries prefer to take the security benefits of cooperation while avoiding the risks of dependency, by maintaining limited alignments (Ciorciari, 2010). Although we have built Ciorciari's work on the cases of Southeast Asia, the argument — that weaker states rationally avoid binary alignment choices — can be extended to South Asia, and is directly referenced in the nascent literature on Pakistan's own alignment behaviour.

It is particularly appropriate in this context for Pakistan but not for the Indian because of two features of hedging theory. From the start, hedging is clearly a small and middle power theory; it has not been used to describe great power politics, as was the case with the categories of balancing and bandwagoning developed for great power politics (Kuik, 2016) and is more applicable to Pakistan's position vis-à-vis the US-China-India triangle than it is to India vis-à-vis the US-China dyad. Second, as evidence of hedging, there needs to be an established dual relationship, a state cannot be said to be hedging if their relationship with both competing powers is not documented in reasonable detail. The thesis builds the exact kind of evidentiary basis for Pakistan's ties with China and US, but not an equivalent level of evidence of India's ties with Russia or China. For that reason, hedging theory has been used in this thesis to explain Pakistan's alignment behaviour, and neorealism for the Indo-US relationship.

Indo-US dynamics in the light of Neorealism.

The interaction between offensive and defensive realist logics is particularly obvious in the coming years of 2020–2025, for this is precisely when these two powers on either side of the partnership were not acting in the same way.

The American side: Offensive-realist motivation. In Washington's view, the one constant, or perhaps even the driving force of this era, was the race in relative naval strength in the Indo Pacific. By 2021, China's navy has also surpassed the United States in its sheer number of battle force vessels, and Beijing has opened port access along the route as part of the Maritime Silk Road, a project that has caused long-term worries for India and Western capitals regarding strategic encirclement (Dutta, 2025). Offensive realism theorizes exactly this reaction to a growing competitor's growing power: a status quo power will seek to prevent an irreversible regional build-up by the competitor. What the United States responded with was institutionalised, high-trust defence integration with India as opposed to merely a military expansion. This is the beginning of three so-called foundational agreements. In 2016, the Logistics Exchange MOA was signed, which gives open access for military refuelling and resupplying for military facilities. LEMOA set up reciprocal arrangements for logistics support between the two militaries with reference to fuel, repair, port facilities etc., but no obligation was laid down for joint operations (Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2016). In September 2018 the

Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement was signed for the exchange of encrypted communications equipment for interoperability. In the 2018 joint statement, COMCASA has been made available for facilitating India's access to advanced defense systems and communications equipment developed by the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2018). This has been expanded by the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) signed on 27 October 2020 that allows each to transfer classified geospatial intelligence to the other country (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). These agreements covered one of the logistical difficulties the two had in doing more than they did—communication, logistics, and target data. Taken together, their descriptions depict a state, the United States, taking a rational step to a rival's growing capability: deepening interoperability with a partner: what offensive realism would predict.

The same principle was carried over to the multilateral sphere during the time period considered. Since Australia's return to the Quad in its naval exercise in 2020 for the first time in 13 years, the grouping has built a degree of interoperability, including in anti-submarine warfare, that Chinese state media itself has called "a pillar of the Asian version of NATO" (Szalwinski, 2023). Quad leaders introduced at the 2022 Tokyo summit the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain (IPPM) for the tracking of "dark shipping" and monitoring Chinese dual-use survey vessels in the Indian Ocean and in 2023 a second initiative on connectivity and resilience of undersea cables (Biden et al., 2022) (Haldar, 2025). None of these instruments are treaties. But these are all the signs of relative strength and organization of which offensive realism is convinced that a status quo power would demand to pursue a rising power — and which therefore appear to provide a satisfactory account of the American side of this deal.

The Indian side: defensive-realist restraint. India's posture during the same time period is closer to defensive realism. India signed all three foundational agreements, bolstered the presence of Malabar and became a part of the Quad's maritime activities. However, New Delhi did not undertake the one thing that would have made this cooperation a partnership: a mutual defence pact. India has traditionally disliked being caught up in any Sino-US strategic rivalry, and this is clearly seen as the security agenda of the Quad got a diluted treatment in the first joint leaders' statement in 2022, where climate change, cyber security, infrastructure, and pandemic response figured prominently (Hatakeyama et al., 2024). In that way, the substance of its cooperation is increasing even if the formality of its commitments is being limited, and it's signaling restraint, not revisionist intent, to China as well as to the United States (Glaser, 1994/95). It is fitting to call India's rhetorical commitment to 'strategic autonomy' and its unwillingness to include any binding treaty language in agreements such as BECA a classic example of defensive realpolitik signalling and not offensive-realist power-building.

It is worth noting that some scholars interpret India's strategic posture as a form of hedging or multi-alignment, with several explicitly characterising its doctrine of strategic autonomy as hedging. However, this thesis does not adopt that interpretation. This is not because India lacks an interest in maintaining relations with multiple major powers, but because this present study does not examine the full range of India's relationships required to establish a hedging strategy. In particular, India's relations with Russia and China fall outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, the study applies defensive realism, which requires evidence only of India's security behaviour in its relationship with the United States. The evidence presented in this chapter is sufficient for that purpose. Hedging requires documented, comparably-weighted dual-power evidence, which I have for Pakistan–US–China but not India–US–China–Russia within my delimited scope.

India's Calibrated Alignment: A Defensive-Realist Reading

India's stance in the IOR in 2020-25 can be interpreted as a posture of security-seeking, with the characteristic features of the model: substantial and functional cooperation and the conscious withholding of commitment at the level of the alliance (Glaser, 1994/95). This combination was a double whammy. It provided India with the intelligence, technology and interoperability that it was not able to develop on its own — a sensible response to China's growing military presence in the Indian Ocean. Concurrently, it managed to prevent India

from becoming a treaty-bound junior partner from whose freedom of manoeuvre towards Beijing, or otherwise, would be limited by alliance commitments. This is what Tarapore (2023) calls "zone balancing", that is, India has made the regional environment more robust and strengthened the resolve of the neighbouring states to resist the pressure from China but without directly challenging Beijing or joining a formal alliance network – a calculated approach that was evident after the 2020 Ladakh border standoff. The specific behaviour being discussed in this thesis, namely longstanding but not binding military ties with the United States, is captured best as a defensive-realist form of signalling: India building up enough military capacity and capability to deter its neighbours without building up so much military commitment that it loses the flexibility that a defensive realist state is expected to value.

Pakistan's Response as Hedging

India's posture is more aptly described by defensive realism, whereas Pakistan's posture towards the US-China rivalry is more aptly described by hedging theory, precisely because the evidentiary requirement hedging imposes (evidenced ties with both competing powers) this thesis is positioned to meet for Pakistan specifically.

Pak-China relations have improved since 2020 and the mainstay of this improvement has been the China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC). The first cost of the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, known as CPEC, was estimated to be approximately 62 billion US dollars for the Chinese government and it has a length of approximately 3000 kilometres from Xinjiang in China to Gwadar in the Arabian Sea of Pakistan. It offers an alternative route for China to the Indian Ocean that lessens China's reliance on the Strait of Malacca, thus alleviating the "Malacca Dilemma" (Elmali, 2024). This corridor is the material backbone of the Pakistan-China relationship, and it is the main reason for China's presence in the region being a necessary background to any analysis of Pakistan's strategic options.

At the same time, and here is where a purely bandwagoning account would have failed to see. Pakistan did not turn its back on Washington during this time, even as that relationship visibly frayed and weakened. After the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, the country's engagement with Pakistan has declined significantly, and Pakistan's leverage, in being of service to Washington's counterterrorism and negotiation agenda in Afghanistan, was significantly diminished (Ali, 2023). In the early 2020s, US assessments of the bilateral relationship were increasingly characterized as a "polycrisis" of political instability, economic fragility, and reduced political influence in Washington; notably, the influence of the Pakistan in Washington had diminished markedly from the years of the Afghan war (Kronstadt, 2023). But the relationship didn't fall apart. This phase of lesser priority was not a time of complete end to all security, economic, and counterterrorism efforts, but rather a time in which they were restricted, yet not eliminated—just the sort of "fallback" option that hedging theory proposes as a state of affairs that is kept open.

This is the empirical hallmarks of hedging as Kuik describes it: to not take sides firmly, while engaging in actions against both powers to remain prepared for the future (Kuik, 2021). There is a nascent body of scholarship that does not ignore Pakistan in its focus. It is also a recent trend to have Pakistan's foreign policy positioning as pragmatic hedging between US and China, wherein Islamabad is dealing with its historic alliances and redefining its priorities in response to the challenges and pressures created by the growing rivalry between the two powers (Jamali and Hussain, 2026). Other scholarship takes a similarly limited view: Pakistan's options for hedging are becoming more constrained as CPEC is implemented deeper and deeper, and as the US switches its strategy toward great-power competition with China after 2021 (Boni, 2021).

The following developments show the costs and pressures that have resulted from this hedge during the studied period. The security burden for the CPEC has increased. Over this time, attacks targeting Chinese personnel and CPEC infrastructure intensified, particularly in Balochistan near Gwadar port, which have directly affected Islamabad's capacity to ensure security guarantees to Beijing which Pakistan has pledged as part of its hedge (Elmali, 2024). The developments are of interest analytically, as they are predicted by hedging

theory: the choice of a strategy designed to address uncertainty and to ensure flexibility in a situation comes with real costs, and the higher the uncertainty, the greater the costs.

Justification for the Combined Framework

This chapter has been divided into two parts because two theoretical traditions have been applied to two distinct actors.

The Indo-US relationship was therefore analyzed through neorealism, as it was at its core a great-power relationship: the rising power (China), and the status quo power as it calibrated its response to the other (US), with the regional power's influence (India). Defensive realism (Waltz, 1979; Glaser, 1994/95) can explain the abruptness of the pace of this cooperation after 2020; offensive realism explains why the cooperation was so limited as to not necessarily preclude formal alliance, which is the one step further India has consistently refused. It's not the one or the other that shows the relationship, it's both.

Pakistan's response was hedged with the aid of the theory of hedging (Kuik, 2021; Ciorciari, 2010) as Pakistan is a middle power insulated between two great powers and it is exactly in this scenario that hedging theory has been developed. Together these two frameworks provide a coherent analytical architecture that is used in analyzing; neorealism for the analysis of cooperation between Indo-US in the Indian Ocean Region and hedging theory for the analysis of diplomatic, economic and security responses by Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative type of research design that is suitable for the research problem that is carried out by this study when the research is a problem of interpretation, meaning and implication strategy rather than statistical measurement. The thesis is not seeking to answer questions that can be answered simply by counting events, since the central questions it addresses are: How did the Indo-US partnership develop? How did that development change the regional balance of power? How did Pakistan interpret and react to this development? They need to read the official statements, policy documents, and act strategically and interpret what all these developments are and what impact they will have on Pakistan's security, diplomacy, and regional status. This interpretive approach is appropriate for a qualitative design, which is the traditional approach to conducting interstate partnership and regional security studies in strategic and international relations scholarship.

Research Method

The research method adopted for this study is qualitative content analysis with a limited number of official documents, policy statements and secondary literature from 2020 to 2025. The content analysis is a methodical process that involves making inferences that are replicable and valid from text by identifying and categorizing patterns of meaning that recur (Krippendorff, 2019).

This selection is not done in isolation; it follows the methodological precedent in the literature that this thesis engages with. In their study on implications of Indo-US strategic partnership for Pakistan, Tahir and Ejaz (2020) opted to utilize content analysis method by drawing on interview and documentary data. Imran et al. (2025) also adopted content and discourse analysis of government documents, white papers, and official statements to trace the evolution of Pakistan's maritime posture. In this paper, the method is limited to only document-oriented, with no data through interviews. The narrower scope is due to the practical constraints of a BS-level thesis, namely the limited institutional access to serving or retired defence officials, and a conscious choice to use only information that was already publically available, such as official statements, defence agreements, documents from government strategy and peer-reviewed scholarship. The model of this study is similar to Bashir's (2025) method of document and theme, but this study includes primary data collection via official texts and statements.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The content analysis is based on the dual theoretical framework (neorealism and hedging theory). Both defensive (Waltz) and offensive (Mearsheimer) versions of neorealism organize the analysis of how the Indo-US relationship has grown closer by focusing on the evidence of capability building, alliance formation and balancing behaviour in the source material. Hedging theory by Kuik (2008) also laid the foundation for the analysis of Pakistan's reaction; the theory represents a strategy of alignment different from balancing or bandwagoning and puts the focus on the evidence for Pakistan's diplomatic ambiguity, diversification and calibrated, non-committal alignment decisions. These two lenses are not used as abstract writing, but as lenses to guide the coding categories that are described in section 3.6 in order to transform from raw description to theoretically informed interpretation.

Data Sources

Two types of material were used in this study, as typical document-based research in the qualitative tradition (Bowen, 2009).

The main primary sources include: Bilateral agreements including the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States of America (USA) 2022, Joint statements by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Public statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and Ministry of Defence of India. Secondary sources include peer reviewed journal articles, books and reports that can be accessed from recognised strategic studies institutions (already used in Literature Review (Strategic Studies, Margalla Papers, Global Foreign Policies Review)) and think-tank publications. There was limited use of reputable news reporting, with it being used only to confirm the timing or events of certain outcomes that have not been published in peer-reviewed literature, as a 2020-2025 timeframe of the study was near the present.

Data Collection Procedure

The materials were gathered by systematically searching academic databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR, Research Gate), official government and defence ministry websites as well as the publication archives of the strategic studies journals identified in the Literature Review. The search terms used were the main concepts of the study such as "Indo-US partnership Indian Ocean," "BECA India Pakistan," "Quad maritime security Pakistan," and "Pakistan hedging China United States" with the targeted period of 2020-2025 used as a filter. This was deliberately picked up—that is, from the signing of BECA in October 2020 till mid-2025, the point at which the study's data collection concluded. Older material has not been included unless it was necessary to provide the historical context for the developments in the period 2020-2025, following the Delimitations outlined in Chapter 1.

Data Analysis Procedure

The material collected was analysed according to the three-step process of qualitative content analysis: preparation, organizing and reporting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). During the preparation, the documents were read in their entirety to become familiar with the document content and context. Coding combined deductive and inductive elements: categories were drawn from the theoretical framework and research questions, while remaining open to categories emerging from the material itself (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

To create a coding scheme for categories, the research objectives of this study were grouped as follows and coded according to the theoretical framework:

- Partnership evolution, such as agreements, joint exercises, technology transfers (descriptive/chronological category)

- Shifts in the balance of power, such as increasing capabilities or forming alliances or basing power (neorealist category)
- Impacts on Pakistan including its deterrence credibility, diplomatic isolation and economic strain (interpretive category)
- Pakistan's response — deterrence measures, diplomatic ambiguity, diversion (hedging-theory category)

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this thesis was to study the growth of Indo-US geostrategic partnership in the IOR from 2020-2025 and the implications on Pakistan. The evidence gathered is consistent with the answers proposed to each research question. The partnership expanded its scope of substance including through instruments like BECA, LEMOA, COMCASA, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy for 2022, without turning into a formal treaty alliance (RQ1). This deepening resulted in a change in the balance of power in favor of India and was reflected in expanded basing rights, capability development, and India's rise to “net security provider” (RQ2) without an equivalent institutional reaction from China and Pakistan. This had created a security dilemma for Pakistan, which was not only a lack of trust in its deterrence capability but also its continued marginalisation from institutions like IORA, economic reliance on China and many other factors, which while they have been documented in isolation in existing scholarship, have not been connected in any single chronological account to date (RQ3). In spite of the increased costs of the hedge (compromised security costs due to CPEC, under-representation of Pakistan in the diplomatic sector across the Middle East and the waterways of the IOR; RQ4), the hedge is not a reactive one but a sustained one, given that Pakistan has been actively pursuing both Washington and Beijing, along with naval modernisation and regional diversification toward the Gulf and smaller IOR states, which fulfills the definitional requirements of a hedge. A major drawback of this account, detailed in Section 1.7, is that these data are not based on interviews and so show no evidence of internal understanding of this hedge as deliberate strategy or as a series of individual reactive decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following is an attempt at being incremental, in view of the resource and institutional constraints that have been highlighted in this thesis; what is administratively and financially viable in the short term and not a complete reorientation of Pakistan's maritime posture.

- Seek membership to IORA as a low cost diplomatic measure. This does not involve investing any capital in the naval force, but rather a constant diplomatic effort and is closely linked to the institutional marginalization that is a recurring cost of Pakistan's position as this thesis has argued.
- Turn the Indian Ocean Policy 2018 into an action plan with Ministries, timelines and reporting mechanism. The policy is available on paper; there was no evidence that this has progressed beyond that in this thesis.
- Focus on low-cost CBM with India over naval buildup while the purpose of the CBMs is to address the escalation risk identified in the literature review at a lower cost, as compared to naval build-up, which cannot be replicated by Pakistan.
- Utilise platforms Pakistan already have more strategically for coalition building and diplomacy and avoiding them as a one-off event that has no follow up between editions.
- Keep building Gulf-state relationships (already in process) as a buffer against overdependence on China, but do not supplant CPEC relationship as it is structurally necessary.

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