



Pakistan's Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean: Geopolitical Rivalries, Strategic Competition, and Regional Stability

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean has become an arena of geopolitical competition due to growing Sino-American rivalry, India's expanding naval power, and the importance of maritime trade and energy routes. These developments create security challenges for Pakistan because of its location, CPEC, and Gwadar Port. This paper examines how the changing strategic environment affects Pakistan's maritime security and regional stability. It uses Sea Power Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory to analyse India's maritime strategy, Indo-Pacific partnerships, Pakistan's naval modernization, Gwadar and CPEC, and emerging non-traditional maritime threats. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyses academic literature, policy documents, and secondary sources. The findings show that Pakistan faces challenges from naval competition and regional militarization, while cooperation with China offers economic opportunities. The study concludes that stronger maritime institutions, diversified partnerships, blue economy development, energy security, and maritime diplomacy can strengthen Pakistan's security and regional stability.

Keywords: Pakistan, Indian Ocean, Maritime Security, Gwadar, CPEC, Quad, AUKUS, Naval Modernization, Blue Economy, Regional Stability.

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1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become the principal arena of twenty-first-century maritime geopolitics. It carries roughly two-thirds of the world's oil shipments and a third of global bulk cargo, and it links the industrial economies of East Asia to the energy reserves of the Persian Gulf through chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and Bab-el-Mandeb. As Sino-American strategic competition has intensified, the IOR has been drawn into a broader contest over sea

lines of communication (SLOCs), naval basing, and rule-making authority (Bragta, 2025; Imran et al., 2025). For Pakistan, a state with a modest 1,050-kilometre coastline yet a pivotal geographic position at the western mouth of the Arabian Sea, this transformation carries disproportionate strategic weight.

Pakistan's maritime security has traditionally been treated as a subordinate concern to its land-centric rivalry with India. However, the operationalisation of Gwadar Port as part of the China-Pakistan



Economic Corridor (CPEC), India's fast-track naval modernization and blue-water aspirations, the strengthening of the Quadrilateral (Quad) and AUKUS as instruments of Indo-Pacific strategy, and Pakistan's own naval modernization through Chinese-built Hangor-class submarines and Type 054A/P frigates have placed the maritime domain at the centre of Pakistan's national security calculations. The National Security Policy of Pakistan (2022-2026) itself acknowledges the maritime security as a part of comprehensive national security as it is clear that Islamabad has a continental strategic culture which needs to be recalibrated towards the sea, which is now recognized at the institutional level (Shahzad et al., 2024).

This paper addresses the research questions of how Pakistan's maritime security is influenced by great-power competition and regional naval rivalries in the Indian Ocean and what strategic and policy options are available to Pakistan to protect and promote its maritime interests and security in the region. This paper is divided into 6 sections. The second part is a theoretical approach. The third section shows the geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR). The fourth section looks at naval modernization and maritime strategy in Pakistan. Gwadar, CPEC, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are discussed in the fifth section. The sixth section looks at the Indo-Pacific strategy of India and the blue economy and non-traditional security options of Pakistan and makes recommendations.

Pakistan's geostrategic culture has been historically conditioned by continental threats. This has been Pakistan's security elites' obsession with India being Pakistan's bogeyman, ever since the partition of British India in 1947, the unresolved territorial dispute over Kashmir with India, and the three wars that Pakistan faced during the last five decades, in 1965, 1971 and 1999. Consequently, the defense budget of Pakistan has been allocated in favor of Army and Air Force than Navy. Thus, Pakistan's maritime security policy has been compartmentalized and fragmented among the Navy, Maritime Security Agency, and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and the provinces' fisheries departments. The aim of this article is to discuss some of the strategic challenges that are impacting Pakistan's strategic culture such as China's naval modernisation of Pakistan, Gwadar and CPEC, and

the naval rivalry in the region, which have caused a change in the Pakistan's continental focus.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three theories are used in this study namely Sea Power Theory, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the geo-economic approach. Combined, these perspectives offer a more comprehensive picture of Pakistan's maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), with a focus on the interconnections between naval capabilities, regional geopolitical dynamics, and economic interests.

The first is Sea Power Theory, stemming in the main from Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) and more recently from Geoffrey Till (2013). The theory focuses on the significance of sea power in a nation's security, economic growth and geopolitical influence. It emphasizes the importance of controlling or securing significant sea lines of communication, maritime trade routes and commercial activities. For Pakistan, Sea Power Theory provides a glimpse into the building up of its naval capabilities and the country's emphasis on sea denial and its absence of sea control. However, in view of the huge naval disparity between Pakistan and India, Pakistan's maritime strategy is more focused on not allowing the adversary to enjoy a free ride on the sea than on controlling vast stretches of the Indian Ocean. It is, therefore, important to consider this viewpoint to evaluate Pakistan's naval modernization and reaction to the emergence of India's maritime power.

The other is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) of Buzan and Wæver (2003). RSCT believes that the security of states is closely linked to the security dynamics of the region they are in. It is very useful for analysing the regional rivalries and external actors' entanglement in the policies of states regarding security. Apart from the rivalry with India, the maritime security of Pakistan is affected in the IOR by China's and the United States' increasing engagement in the region. The relationship between these two has thus been analysed in the context of RSCT, which provides a framework for understanding the impact of these relationships on Pakistan's maritime strategy and naval modernization (Shahzad et al., 2024; Kaplan, 2010).

The third angle is geo-economics, the combination of economic tools and geo-political goals. It gives

the answers to strategic significance of CPEC and Gwadar Port in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Infrastructure, trade, ports and investments can have both strategic and economic dimensions from this point of view. The framework thus enables a study of the impact of China's economic cooperation with Pakistan on its maritime security. These frameworks cover all three aspects: Sea Power Theory, Regional Security Competition and geo-economics and together they allow for a multidimensional analysis.

3. Geopolitical Rivalries and Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean

The present-day competition between the two countries in IOR can be broadly categorised into three: Sino-American Strategic competition, Sino-Indian Strategic competition and the geopolitical competition between India and Pakistan. The main reason for the US being in the IOR is to ensure the security of the Middle East and East Asia through the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and their combined base in Diego Garcia (CSIS, 2026). China's commercial and naval activities in the IOR, such as its inaugural overseas naval base in Djibouti, have contributed to the "String of Pearls" narrative, suggesting China's desire to build a chain of military and commercial infrastructure in the IOR (CSIS, 2026; Bragta, 2025).

India's response to the growing Chinese influence in the IOR has been manifested in its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) strategy, increased naval presence in the IOR, and deeper strategic ties with the US (Bragta, 2025). Of particular interest is that India is pursuing a big naval modernization initiative, which is an attempt to counter China's naval push in the IOR. As per the reports, India's navy has increased from approximately 130 warships and submarines to 145 warships and submarines by November 2025. India's navy-building plans are to reach 150-160 warships by 2030 and over 200 by 2035 (Rao, cited in Eurasia Review, 2025; pwnlyias, 2026). Consistently with the country's Aatmanirbhar Vision 2047, India has been investing in domestic shipbuilding, with the capital expenditures (CE) on the navy rising from about ₹49,623 crores in 2020-21 to ₹1,03,548 crore in 2025-26 (Rao, cited in Eurasia Review, 2025; pwnlyias, 2026).

According to the reports, India's capital expenditure on its submarine bastions (Project Varsha in

Visakhapatnam) and aircraft carriers (Project Seabird in Karwar) is planned to increase and strengthen India's naval modernization (GIS Reports, 2025). In effect, India's naval modernisation programme has led to the creation of a very aggressive naval capability expansion in the IOR which has direct and negative impact on Pakistan's maritime security. The ongoing India-Pakistan standoff in May 2025 highlights Pakistan's maritime security as a crucial factor in the India-Pakistan strategic rivalry, for example (Friday Times, 2026). Pakistan proved its resolve and capability in the maritime sphere in the 2025 crisis to keep India at bay. Pakistan, though, has a weaker naval capability than India and would like to attain strategic deterrence through its sea potential by balancing sea control with sea denial on the part of India.

4. Pakistan's Naval Modernization and Maritime Strategy

Pakistan's maritime policy has always been based on principles of minimum credible deterrence, due to India's capabilities in this domain. In fact, Pakistan has been using a "sea denial" tactic to counter the "sea control" tactic of India in the northern Arabian Sea (The Diplomat, 2025). In this context, Pakistan is in the process of modernisation of its navy with the help of China for credible sea denial potential. As per the agreement signed in 2015, China will transfer eight air independent propulsion (AIP) submarines of the Hangor class (Type 039B) to Pakistan, fabricated in Wuchang, while the last four will be produced in Karachi via a technology transfer program (Liu & Bai, 2025; Quwa, 2026). The first submarine, PNS/M Hangor, was launched in April 2024 and is expected to enter service in 2026 while the second and third submarines are expected to be launched by 2025. Overall, the initial eight submarines will be commissioned by 2028 (Liu & Bai, 2025; Armyrecognition, 2025). Interestingly, AIP submarines would have the record for Pakistan's largest submarine procurement by over 300% and would make Pakistan's submarine fleet the largest in the country's history (Quwa, 2026).

In addition to bolstering its submarine fleet, Pakistan has been upgrading its surface fleet. In particular, Pakistan has been buying four Tughril-class (Type 054A/P) Chinese-made frigates and has been constructing MILGEM corvettes with Turkey

and has launched the Jinnah-class frigate project (Quwa, 2026; Defence Security Asia, 2026a). It is also noteworthy that Pakistan's naval diplomacy is becoming a form of rotational port visits of its naval ships to other IOR nations. For example, Pakistan will send its new submarine Hangor, along with the Tughril and F-22P frigates, to Colombo in 2026 to demonstrate Pakistan's naval strength in the IOR (Defence Security Asia, 2026a). In the overall context, Pakistan's naval modernization and diplomacy aims to assure its naval potential to showcase its military strength in the IOR and to undertake naval diplomacy. It is important to note that Pakistan is not developing blue water navy capabilities, but rather sea denial capabilities in order to deter India from dominating the northern part of the Arabian Sea.

5. Gwadar Port, CPEC, and the Belt and Road Initiative

Gwadar Port has been at the center of Pakistan's geopolitical and geostrategic considerations due to its location at the crossroads of maritime and continental trade routes. Gwadar Port, the deep-water port on the Makran coast of Balochistan province, is approximately 75 miles from the Iranian border and the Strait of Hormuz, and is the gateway to China's \$62 billion CPEC (Britannica, 2025; CSIS, 2026). The port of Gwadar is being intensely focused on by Pakistan, China, India and the US because of its strategic significance and geographical position as the end point of CPEC. In particular, Gwadar has been considered as a potential naval base by China (CSIS, 2026; Equilibrium, 2025).

Gwadar's importance as a hub of strategic competition has risen since Pakistan opened up its transit route to Iran in April 2026. According to the Transit of Goods through the Territory of Pakistan Order 2026, Pakistan allows Iran to transport goods through Pakistan's Gwadar, Karachi, and other land routes (Defence Security Asia, 2026b). With its transit capability to Iran, Pakistan has won a crucial place in the supply route for Chinese goods to Iran and Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics. In fact, the port of Gwadar has become an important distribution hub for China and Pakistan. In this regard, Pakistan has been upgrading Gwadar Free Zone to attract manufacturers and other processors to set up production units (Eurasia Review, 2025).

The geopolitical tensions and disagreements

between the Baloch separatists and the Pakistani government, however, have harmed the strategic importance of Gwadar, and its economic potential. In March 2024, the Baloch Liberation Army attacked Chinese labourers and government facilities in Gwadar, which is the port of the Pakistan port city of Gwadar (Britannica, 2025). The US, meanwhile, is concerned that Gwadar's deep-water harbor would enable China to build its own naval base in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea that would hamper the US Fifth Fleet's operations in the region (Equilibrium, 2025). In fact, Gwadar has transformed into a flashpoint of strategic competition between China and the US, and has turned out to be a key weakness in the national security of Pakistan since the strategic depth of the city is limited.

6. India's Maritime Ambitions and the Indo-Pacific Strategic Architecture

The course of naval modernisation in India, as well as its strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has to be understood in the backdrop of the country's tacit strategic partnership with the Indo-Pacific strategy of the U.S. that includes the Quad. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) with members the United States, Japan, Australia and India is increasingly being used to share intelligence and technologies in ensuring the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific, as stated in the Foreign Ministers' statements of January 2025 (Behorizon, 2026). Likewise, the AUKUS security agreement between Australia, the U.K. and the USA aimed at nuclear submarines reinforces the Quad, and together they form two strands of the U.S. strategy to prevent a security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific (Şeker & Özel, 2025).

India's balancing game of Quad and China is a good example of its hedging. While India is pushing for more regional inclusiveness (such as the 'quad plus' format), it is also pursuing more strategic autonomy – including a new ten-year defence framework agreement signed with the U.S. in 2025 for the sale of attack drones, transport aircraft, and maritime patrol aircraft (World Geostrategic Insights, 2026; Singh, 2026). India's zone-balancing strategy aims to offset China's inroads in the IOR without having to fully commit to the U.S., with all the unpredictability that entails (CESCUBE, 2025).

It is Pakistan's view that any such strategic thinking, emanating from India, would directly impact

Pakistan, as competition and collaboration are both integral parts of India's maritime strategy. Firstly, Pakistan is being left behind in the race of maritime acquisitions as India's fleet of surveillance planes, aircraft carriers, submarines, and patrol craft has been significantly improved with U.S. intelligence, technology and logistics (World Geostrategic Insights, 2026). Second, the 'deep engagement' of Pakistan with China has become more region-centric and therefore could have impact on the influence Pakistan can exert in the IOR and on strategic hedging. Whereas, Pakistan has no other strategic partnership in the IOR and the scope and impact of Pakistan's patrols, maritime diplomacy and naval trade are limited in the IOR, implications for which are significant for Pakistan's blue economy (World Geostrategic Insights, 2026).

7. Blue Economy, Energy Security, and Non-Traditional Maritime Threats

In addition to the great power geo-political issues in the IOR, Pakistan needs to focus more on its strategic maritime interests, especially the blue economy, and also on other non-traditional security issues. Pakistan has a huge Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Arabian Sea spanning approximately 244,000 km², which is a great opportunity to exploit fisheries, hydrocarbons, tourism, etc., a blue economy. However, it has not been able to achieve the desired results in comparison to its adjacent countries because of lack of inter-agency coordination between the Maritime Security Agency, Pakistan Navy and fisheries departments, along with the lack of adequate infrastructure outside the main cities of Karachi and Gwadar (Imran et al., 2025).

Energy security, in particular, should be a key strategic interest for Pakistan, as the country relies on seaborne imports for most of its oil and significant proportion of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) via the Strait of Hormuz, and there is a risk of disruption due to great-power geopolitical tussles in the Gulf (Migration Letters, 2024).

The non-traditional security threats in the IOR, including armed robbery, illicit trafficking, climate change, and piracy, are likely to remain and will require a renewed interdiction campaign by the Pakistan Navy, Maritime Security Agency (MSA) and Coast Guard with a focus on Pakistan's neighbouring states, particularly India and Sri Lanka, as they are the ones with the greatest

potential for such threats (Imran et al., 2025; Bragta, 2025). Likewise, impacts of climate change will affect the Arabian Sea through their direct effects, including sea-level rise, and the more extreme climate events, including cyclones, along the Makran coast, affecting Pakistan's exposed coastal ecosystems and communities.

8. Implications for Regional Stability

The overall impact of the IOR's trends is directly related to regional strategic stability and a number of key factors will increase strategic uncertainty. First, the rivalry between Great Powers, mainly between China and the U.S., because of regional security dynamics may involve in risky scenarios with Pakistan Navy, especially in the case of increasing the number of submarines and frigates in IOR, while limited diplomatic and military crisis management options are available (Shahzad et al., 2024). Further complicating the situation between the two countries is that both have nuclear weapons and do not have strong communication tools between the naval commanders.

Meanwhile, increasing interdependence among IOR States, especially in terms of freedom of navigation, anti-piracy and anti-trafficking, and climate change effects, offer benefits for cooperation, but this cooperation is hindered by Pakistan's balancing act and India's emerging regional ambitions. Pakistan's engagement in maritime cooperation and competition through multinational task forces to combat piracy and other maritime security issues illustrates it (Bragta, 2025). Pakistan's improved strategic sense and regional cooperation will help achieve strategic stability in the IOR.

One last implication of the strategy is the possibility of an arms race in the IOR between India and Pakistan, and the possibility of regional instability. India has been upgrading its naval strength to face China and Pakistan has tried for further platforms from China to neutralize the Indian naval buildup. But other great powers, especially the U.S. in Quad and AUKus, add to the strategic uncertainties as both China and Pakistan see these developments, respectively, as containment against India and Pakistan (Şeker & Özel, 2025). This arms race can be lessened by the use of confidence building measures, like agreement on encounters between Indian and Pakistani subs and ships, or sharing of maritime domain awareness, to minimise

miscalculations.

9. Policy Recommendations

Pakistan needs to have a holistic and diversified maritime policy, with an emphasis on enhancing naval cooperation with China and concurrently building partnerships with Gulf countries, Türkiye, ASEAN, and other maritime actors in the region. It should establish a firm and independent Indian Ocean policy with more emphasis on sea interests. Pakistan should also improve its blue economy which can be achieved by investing in fisheries, shipping, ports, tourism etc. in the sea. A better development of Gwadar should bring more benefits to the local communities and alleviate social tensions. Pakistan should be more involved with regional and international maritime institutions and security exercises. Last but not least, there is a need for more investment in maritime education, research, technology and expert institutions to enhance the understanding and response of the challenges emerging in the maritime domain in

Pakistan.

10. Conclusion

This study concludes that Pakistan's maritime security is strongly influenced by India's naval expansion, Sino-American competition, the militarization of the Indian Ocean, and the strategic importance of CPEC and Gwadar. India remains Pakistan's main maritime security concern, while China provides important strategic and economic opportunities. Sea Power Theory highlights Pakistan's focus on naval deterrence and sea denial, while Regional Security Complex Theory shows that Pakistan's maritime security is connected with wider regional power competition. However, naval modernization alone is not enough. Pakistan needs a comprehensive maritime strategy combining defence, economic development, diplomacy, stronger institutions, blue economy, and cooperation against non-traditional threats. Such an approach can reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen Pakistan's role in regional maritime stability.

Conflict of Interest

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