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The Indo-Pacific from Islamabad: South Asian Responses to Quad and AUKUS Strategic Architectures

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Abstract

The organising principle of the present great power competition has become the Indo-Pacific, but it's not received equally across the region where two oceans meet. This article explores the analytical and institutional meaning and reaction to two of the most prominent institutional manifestations of the concept: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia–United Kingdom–United States partnership (AUKUS), specifically in South Asian states, with analytical priority given to Pakistan. The study employs a qualitative comparative design, which combines balance-of-threat theory, the hedging literature, and regional security complex theory to account for the variation in state responses. It makes three claims. The first is that Pakistan's response should be understood as a constrained hedging: a mixture of normative criticism of "bloc politics," strengthening ties with China and some re-engagement with Washington and the Gulf, and maritime confidence-building, influenced by the material imbalance in its relationship with India as well as by an army-centred foreign policy process. Secondly, India is also a co-builder and a passive member, hoping to gain capabilities and status through the Quad while remaining a strategically independent nation, and without the alliance obligations that AUKUS represents. Third, smaller South Asian countries take an "architecture agnostic" approach, focusing on development finance and sovereignty rather than alignment. The article concludes that South Asia views the Indo-Pacific through the prism of Indo-Pak rivalry and Sino-Indian competition and outlines the policy choices that Islamabad will have which will not be entrapment nor strategic isolation.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Quad, AUKUS, Pakistan, South Asia, hedging, Strategic Autonomy, China-Pakistan relations

Introduction

In less than a decade the Indo-Pacific has gone from a prism of geography to one of strategic policy in Washington, Canberra, Tokyo and New Delhi. The term is not neutral, it is a contestation of a maritime space, designed to broaden the thinking of "Asia" beyond a China-centred "Asia-Pacific" and make space for India and others to counter Beijing's increasing influence, says Medcalf (2020). As Doyle and Rumley (2019) demonstrate, the concept has a much longer and more complex pedigree, stretching back to the early 20th century and the geopolitical debates over the Indian and Pacific oceans, and has always had analytical and

political agendas. He and Li (2020) go on to suggest that what actors mean by the term differently in the region makes the Indo-Pacific more of an environment for testing competing visions of order than a common one.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which included Australia, India, Japan and the United States, was initially proposed in 2007, suspended in 2008, reinvigorated in November 2017 at the senior level and upgraded to the leaders' level in 2021. It is a consultative forum, primarily non-military, on maritime security, critical technologies, infrastructure, health and disaster relief. AUKUS, which was announced in September 2021, is another type. The first pillar involves the United States and the United Kingdom helping Australia build conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines; the second pillar focuses on advanced capabilities like undersea systems, artificial intelligence and hypersonics. The Quad is a minilateral coordination effort, AUKUS is a deep defence-industrial cooperation among treaty allies. Both are widely read in Beijing as tools of containment, and both have been discussed with unprecedented fervor in South Asia – the only sub-region of the Indo-Pacific with both a Quad member and two nuclear-armed adversaries, plus several countries with ports and debts, thus becoming a symbol of great-power rivalry.

In this context Pakistan has a very unusual situation. It is within the geographical proximity of the Indian Ocean, it supports Gwadar as a maritime hub of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and it is located on the Arabian Sea sea-lines which facilitate most of the energy trade in the Indo-Pacific region. It does not belong to either of these or be a formal interlocutor with either, nor have it published anything akin to India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative or Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook. It is not, then, a result of a long series of deliberative decisions on threat, opportunity and constraint, but rather a series of ad hoc ones. The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is seen from Islamabad as an event that befalls Pakistan versus one that Pakistan can influence.

The article considers three questions. So how have India, Pakistan and the smaller South Asian countries understood and reacted to the Quad and AUKUS? Second, why are there variations in these responses? Thirdly, what strategic choices does Pakistan have on the table? There are three contributions. There is a careful distinction drawn between the Quad and AUKUS, not a fusion of the two, and between Pakistan's rhetorical opposition to both and its inability to reject either or both formats; the concept of "constrained hedging" is developed to explain this; and the article centers Pakistan in an examination which typically focused on India.

Literature Review

The Indo-Pacific as a space and as people

The scholarship on Indo-Pacific is bifurcated into those that see it as a tangible phenomenon of interlinked maritime economies and those that see it as a political endeavour. In an important sense, Heiduk and Wacker are also members of the second group—they argue that in fact there is no single Indo-Pacific policy, because the concept's definition of purposes, membership, and the status of ASEAN is significantly different among the governments they studied. This observation is important for South Asia because it challenges the assumption of either being "in" or "out" of the concept of a state. The positions are based on an honor system, and they are based on positions.

The literature on India is by far the richest, and presents the main interpretative debates. Chacko (2014) suggests that the adoption of the Indo-Pacific by India is indicative of an ideational shift in foreign policy, and the rethinking of India's natural sphere of interest. Earlier, Mohan (2012) described the same shift in material terms as a rivalry between China and India, which was transforming the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific into a single strategic

theatre. Brewster (2014) notes that Indian effort to assert itself as a leader in the Indian Ocean and concerns with China's access to ports and facilities in the neighbourhood is one reason behind New Delhi's enthusiasm for any architecture that makes Beijing's maritime calculations more difficult. Grare (2017) illustrates the deepening of Indian relations with Japan, Vietnam and others in its "turn East" but still entanglement in the Sino-American rivalry.

The question of how much India is ready to balance is even more pronounced. Pant and Joshi (2016) view such Indian reactions to the American pivot as a "strategic pragmatism" to seek "benefits" of US attention without relying on it. A more critical opinion is that of Rajagopalan (2020) who believes that India engages in "evasive balancing": instead of directly challenging China or joining a formal coalition, it depends upon others to bring pressure to bear, maintaining options open all along the way, which he considers strategically unsustainable in the long term. It is what Hall (2019) understands as a reinvention effected through multi-alignment and a more assertive national identity than a clean alignment with the United States. Partnerships with Indian Ocean and Pacific countries provide India with new capability and reach, as emphasised by the "theatre of opportunity" of the Indian Ocean/Indian Pacific by Baruah (2020). Smith (2020) puts the Sino-Indian rivalry at the heart of this narrative, a rivalry that has turned into a 'cold peace,' with border tension now coming and going. Madan's 2020 work as the corrective to the history as it has repeatedly been the case in US-India ties; when the Chinese behaviour alarms both capitals, it is a time of convergence, and when it does not, it's a time of drift.

The debate on Indo-Pacific is less closely related to literature on Pakistan's foreign policy, but its fundamental tenets are crucial. It is observed that strategic identity has been built against India and Pakistan's army is the prime custodian of this identity by Cohen (2004). Fair (2014) examines the strategic culture of the army and its consistent tendency to revisionist and asymmetric strategies towards India while Shah (2014) illustrates the institutional dominance of the army in all governments and its influence over foreign and security policy. There is also an economic aspect that Siddiqi (2007) covered by presenting the commercial interests of the military which have contributed to their institutional independence. Lieven (2011) cautions that Pakistan's civilian institutions and economy are weak, which restricts the government's ability to make long-term plans.

As regards his views on external alignments, Small (2015) maintains that the China-Pakistan relationship is founded on shared apprehensions of India, and is now more than just a diplomatic partnership, as it has become a very deep strategic and economic entanglement. In Markey's (2020) account, the relationship can be understood in the context of Beijing's wider policy of trying to reach out to the West via Pakistan as a strategic gateway to the Indian Ocean and a demonstration of Chinese initiatives for connectivity. When it comes to the idea of Pakistan joining any Indo-Pacific architecture, it is going to be seen through three lenses: the lens of India rivalry, the lens of China partnership, and the lens of institutional interests of the army.

Research Gap

While the literature provides in-depth explanations of India's Indo-Pacific strategy and Pakistan's domestic and bilateral calculations, there is a dearth of systematic attempts to understand how Pakistan (and other South Asian states) react to the Indo-Pacific architectures themselves. Even fewer are able to differentiate between Quad and AUKUS as subjects of reaction. This article fills that void.

Theoretical Framework

Balancing, threat and soft balancing.

Neorealist theory predicts that states will balance against concentrations of power, yet empirical evidence indicates that states are more likely to respond to perceived threat than simply power. Walt (1987) refines the argument by proposing that threat is a function of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability and perceived intentions. The refinement is especially significant for South Asia, where Pakistan views India as a threat to its very existence, rather than any other remote Indo-Pacific nation, and where India views China as a near threat to the nation, more so than America's dominance. Paul (2018) builds on the list of responses by proposing soft balancing, a type of state action that involves the use of institutions, diplomatic coordination and limited military collaboration to hold a stronger state in check without forming formal alliances. The Quad is considered to be an act of soft balancing by its members and Pakistan's diplomatic chiding of "bloc politics" is interpreted as a soft balancing in reverse, an attempt to delegitimise an architecture that Pakistan cannot deal with physically.

In fact, the balance of threat theory does not account for states that neither balance nor bandwagon. This is where the hedging literature can be found. Hedging is defined by Kuik (2008) as behaviour associated with a state's actions to seek out several policy alternatives, often ones that are inconsistent, to protect the state from risk and ensure options in the face of high uncertainty. Kuik (2016) further elaborates on how states hedge, identifying two types: returns-maximising and risk-contingency and acknowledging that the nature of hedging depends on both external structure and domestic legitimacy and elite calculations. Haacke (2019) provides a criticism and a proposal, suggesting that the need for a more precise definition of hedging is needed to prevent taking the term to mean anything other than diversification and that the rejection of exclusive commitment should be accepted as the defining characteristic, not the rejection of ambiguity. This article subscribes to Haacke's discipline: Only where a state is seen to pursue returns and engage in identifiable risk-contingency measures, is such risk-taking attributed to hedging.

The regional security complexes form the basis for regional architecture

According to Buzan and Wæver (2003) the regional level is the most interdependent in terms of security and that regional security complexes are defined by amity-enmity patterns as well as by the distribution of power. The India-Pakistan rivalry is the main determinant of the security environment of all other states in South Asia, and the external powers get in from either side. Acharya (2007) builds on this by demonstrating that regional orders are 'co-created' between power, institutions and ideas, and that they are not simply a product of external projects, but are also constructed by the regions themselves. Theoretically, the notion of Indo-Pacific architectures will be understood in the South Asia context in the existing complex and not in its own terms.

Analytical propositions

The framework produces three propositions which outline the empirical analysis.

Beneath the surface, South Asian countries considered the QUAD and AUKUS in the context of the Indo-Pak dynamics, and Sino-Ind competition more than their explicit Indo-Pacific objectives.

Only the Quad includes a member from the South Asian region, thus motivating their normative and legal response to it, but not their response to AUKUS which is institutionally dense and nuclear related.

P3 (Constrained hedging): States with a proximate adversary and a single dominant patron have constrained hedging, while states without such constraints have more architecture agnostic strategies.

Research Design and Methodology

This study is of a qualitative comparative case design. The countries are India, Pakistan and four smaller countries of South Asia (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal). India and Pakistan are analyzed jointly as the main cases as they represent two polar extremes in relation to the regional complexity and architectures. The smaller states are diverse in economic dependence, geographic location and political regime – they offer a teste for the extent to which the patterns found in the principal states hold true.

The evidence comes from three types of source material: official documents and public statements, such as strategy papers, joint statements, foreign ministry briefings and announcements of the maritime exercises (to October 2026); the secondary scholarly literature referenced throughout; and reputable press and think-tank reporting of events up to October 2026. The technique used is interpretive process tracing, in which the sequence of the announcements, reactions and policy changes are reconstructed, and the degree of each proposition's correspondence with the observed record is evaluated.

The Quad and AUKUS**The Quad**

The Quad's roots go back to the cooperative response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, and to the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe's 2007 initiative. It lapsed due to early Chinese diplomatic protest and change of Australian and Indian political stand. This resurgence happened in 2017 when the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and on the Himalayan border became an issue. The Leaders' summits of 2021–2024 expanded the scope of the grouping to supply vaccines, critical and emerging technologies, cooperation on climate change, and infrastructure and awareness of the maritime domain. There is no treaty, mutual defence agreement or secretariat for the Quad. It's not a military bloc, it's a weak club that makes it good for India, its members have made it clear.

The Quad's political trajectory in 2025-2026 has also been choppy. A leaders' summit in India was repeatedly postponed due to strained relations between India and the United States over tariff issues, and press reports at the time in 2026 suggest that foreign ministers and high officials were still meeting but a leaders' meeting was still pending. The grouping itself, however, has not fallen apart, but rather its symbolic strength is eroded and such calculations by South Asian observers will affect the prices they are willing to pay or reject for joining or opposing it.

AUKUS

AUKUS emerged in September 2021, and was given military elements at the expense of the Quad. Australia dropped a plan to purchase French conventionally powered submarines and chose a route to buy and build nuclear powered ones, support from the United States and United Kingdom, a staged "optimal pathway" being announced in 2023, which involves the rotational deployment of nuclear-powered U.S. and U.K. submarines in Western Australia, and eventual Australian acquisition and construction. The cooperation for advanced technologies has been expanded in Pillar II and opened to consultations with other partners including Japan. When the political landscape in Washington shifted, the agreement was put on the shelf and in the end of 2025, it was reported that the administration would move forward with it.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of AUKUS is its non-proliferation component, outside the Anglosphere. This, Acton 2021 claims, establishes a precedent for other countries to follow, as the accord in safeguards agreements allows for the withdrawal of nuclear material from regular safeguards inspection when it is used for "other military purposes", including for

naval propulsion. AUKUS partners reply that Australia will not enrich or reprocess nuclear material and that it will collaborate with the IAEA to develop verification measures. The issue is directly linked to South Asia, a region that is home to two nuclear armed states that are not a part of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and have long condemned as “nuclear apartheid” their view of discriminatory nuclear norms.

Why the distinction matters

The two architectures are different in their functionality, membership and risk. The Quad - The Consultation forum relies on the ebb and flow of interest of its most dominant member, and the willingness of India to be perceived as aligned. The effects of AUKUS on South Asia are indirect and structural: it strengthens allied presence in the Indian Ocean, increases normalisation of nuclear-powered submarine propulsion and indicates that the most powerful Western security investments in the region will be with treaty allies not partners. This distinction is the basis for Proposition P2 and is reflected in the analysis to follow.

In India, it was co-architect and reluctant participation

India's answer to the two architectures validates Proposition P1 and partially validates P2. New Delhi was a reluctant member of the original Quad, but has since become its indispensable member since the border standoffs with China in 2017 and 2020. It has strengthened its defence cooperation with Washington under the foundational deal on logistics, communications and geospatial data, extended the scope of the Malabar naval exercise to include all the four, and has promoted its own Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative as a model that sees the inclusion and Indian Ocean leadership. Meanwhile, it has always denied the Quad was an alliance and insisted on the primacy of ASEAN, and has continued to maintain relationships with Russia and Iran, both of which irks Washington. This is what Rajagopalan calls "evasive balancing", and it is more apt a description of hedging rather than alignment. AUKUS' response from India has been subdued. It was not a party, it does not have a treaty relationship with the participants, it has its own nuclear submarine programme, and a history of leased Russian vessels. The Indian Ocean is where any allied capability is welcome, and India is an outsider to the “Anglosphere” exclusivity that AUKUS would represent, though not widely acknowledged by Indian strategists. New Delhi has not spoken negatively about the non-proliferation aspects, partly because it has for long been wanting to be accepted as responsible nuclear power and partly because it's seen that the argument that naval nuclear propulsion is inherently destabilising has now been weakened.

The strains of 2025 showed India's limits of alignment. Washington's tariff manoeuvres, Russian oil projects and the American recent push to deal with Pakistan following a crisis in May 2025 gave rise to a tangible chill with both Beijing and Washington, as well as the country's new Pakistan ally. The tariff moves of Washington, Russian oil orders and a tentative thaw with Beijing, with the Americans also warming up to Pakistan after a crisis in May 2025 were visible indications of a cooling trend with both countries and their new Pakistan ally. India went ahead and strengthened its “hedge” policy by further developing relations with Japan and Australia, and the European countries while seeing a limited thaw with China. The episode implies that New Delhi cannot move ahead with India's Quad membership without America's active interest in it, and India will do so when it feels neglected.

Pakistan: Constrained Hedging

Declaratory positions

The official discourse of Pakistan is ambivalent towards the Indo Pacific. Its national security perspective, as reflected in its recent policy statements, underscores the importance of geo-economics, connectivity and non-alignment in the context of great power competition and its

officials regularly warn against bloc politics and the militarisation of the Indian Ocean. Islamabad policy commentary has positioned the Quad as an India-centred initiative for China containment that risks Pakistan getting into a clash and AUKUS as a nuclear proliferation danger that legitimises double standards. These objections stem from Pakistan's resistance against discriminatory nuclear regimes, which has a long history, and are legal and normative in nature, whereas objections against the Quad are practical and are related to the bolstering of India's position.

Behavioural alignments

But rhetoric is not as subtle as behaviour. The most important military and economic relationship that Pakistan has is with China, which will provide most of the major weapons platforms for the modernisation of the Navy's undersea force, and fund much of CPEC, including the port of Gwadar. However, Pakistan's maritime diplomacy is also a very inclusive one. This is because the navy conducts the multinational Aman exercises, where American, Chinese, European and regional forces have joined, and also commands task forces under the Combined Maritime Forces, a cooperation model spearheaded by the U.S. Navy. These activities are not just a proof of competition but also returns maximising activities which show that Pakistan is not only a competitor but also a provider of maritime security.

Since 2025, Pakistan's hedging has been more apparent as a risk-contingency factor. Following its crisis with India in May 2025, Islamabad's ties with Washington also began to strengthen, with trade, minerals, and counter-terrorism cooperation also coming up during the discussions. In September 2025, Islamabad signed a strategic mutual defence agreement with Saudi Arabia, further diversifying its security partnerships beyond China. To the west, Pakistan has been trying to keep the peace with Iran, despite the border incidents this year, because they know that Gwadar is significant in Indian and Chinese military thinking and instability on the Iranian border would weaken the western flank of Pakistan. The moves reflect risk diversification among multiple patrons, which is consistent with a state's approach.

Why the hedging is constrained

There are three constraints of Pakistan freedom of manoeuvre. The first is the asymmetry with India. As one of the Quad members, any attempt at rapprochement between Pakistan and one of the Quad's leading members is interpreted in Islamabad as being under the Indian agenda and any rejection leads to possible diplomatic isolation. Ganguly (2017) opines that the Indo-Pak conflict has been in a "deadly deadlock" where neither side can significantly influence the strategic equation and where Pakistan is extremely vulnerable to any change that favours India. The second one is the nuclear and maritime deterrence. Ganguly and Kapur (2010) discuss the stability–instability paradox in South Asia and an emerging trend of the Indian Ocean's salience for sea-based deterrence, with submarine development by any actor capable of impacting Pakistan's second-strike calculus. AUKUS expands the allied footprint in the Indian Ocean and thus contributes to the Pakistani concerns of a growing "crowded" and "opaque" underwater environment in the Indian Ocean.

The third limitation is homegrown. The literature examined above suggests that, under institutional domination of the army, foreign policy is security-oriented and is tightly linked to the China cooperation. IMF programmes and Chinese credit limits fiscal autonomy. All these constraints converge to limit the hedging space: Pakistan can diversify its options but cannot afford to offend Beijing, cannot even come close to India's capabilities and cannot ignore the views of Washington and the Gulf.

Smaller south Asian states: Architecture-agnostic strategies

Proposition P3 is confirmed by the smaller South Asian countries. They have no immediate threat like Pakistan that can match their on Pakistan and have their solutions based on sovereignty and development financing, balanced between India and China.

Sri Lanka is the most popular example. Hambantota port's 99-year lease with a Chinese state-owned firm in 2017 is emblematic of the practice of debt-trap diplomacy. The actual record is more complex. Wignaraja et al. (2020) argue that the Chinese lending was only a component of Sri Lanka's debt and that domestic decision-making was a key determinant in who borrowed, how much, and especially how, while Brautigam (2020) illustrates that there is little evidence for the "debt-trap" story. Colombo is balancing its actions since its financial crisis in 2022 (Rebuild by Blueprints), crossing paths with India, Japan and multilateral creditors, but not affiliating with any security group.

Bangladesh's Indo Pacific Outlook of 2023 has included the following emphasis: inclusiveness, non-alignment and economic cooperation, and excluded any reference that might be interpreted as supporting the Quad. The Maldives swung back and forth between India-first attitude and an opposition to the Indian military presence in 2023 and then to a pragmatic change of gears with New Delhi while maintaining economic engagement with China. The debate in Nepal over the American Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, which was signed in 2022 and was accompanied by an interpretive declaration following a bitter battle within the country regarding its linkage to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, is a case in point.

9. Discussion

The evidence is in favor of the three propositions with qualifications. The regional rivalry drives each State to interpret the architectures, thus P1 is strongly supported. P2 is supported in terms of Pakistan and partially India but the smaller states are neither responsive to P2 in normative terms. P3 is bolstered by the sense of Pakistan's limited hedging, but also by the fact that smaller states have more options for hedging, and Sri Lanka illustrates that even a state without an immediate threat can suffer significant constraints as a result of its debt.

State	Declaratory stance	Behavioural alignment	Dominant strategy
India	Quad supporter; AUKUS silent	Deepening partnerships; strategic autonomy retained	Evasive balancing / multi-alignment
Pakistan	Critical of bloc politics and AUKUS	China-centred; selective US and Gulf engagement	Constrained hedging
Sri Lanka	Non-aligned	Balances India, China, lenders	Architecture-agnostic hedging
Bangladesh	Inclusive Indo-Pacific Outlook	Economic diversification	Architecture-agnostic
Maldives	Fluctuating	Alternating between India and China	Opportunistic hedging
Nepal	Sovereignty-focused	Contested domestic debates	Defensive neutrality

The overarching message is that the Indo-Pacific is not a single security race but three overlapping security races Sino-Indian maritime race, India-Pakistan race and the race for infrastructure funding. The Quad is geared toward the first, AUKUS to the broader question of naval and nuclear governance, leaving the second the primary concern of Islamabad – to be

ignored. This disconnection is the reason why policymakers in Pakistan consider the Indo-Pacific as an outlier in their strategic agenda even as it is the new strategic environment.

Policy implications for Pakistan

Islamabad must have a positive approach towards maritime affairs, not only critical. If the Indian Ocean approach is adopted, with focus on security of sea lines, confidence building, and economic connectivity, Pakistan will be able to engage in the discussion on its own terms. Second, it needs to broaden inclusive maritime diplomacy in the context of the Aman exercises and participation in Combined Maritime Forces and suggest naval confidence-building initiatives with India for incident prevention and submarine transparency. Third, it should not lose sight of its ties with China and diversify its great power relations through trade, cooperation in minerals and technology with the United States, the Gulf and Europe. Fourth, it should play an active role in the non-proliferation debate, and promote the concept of clear and open measures to protect naval nuclear propulsion, not opposition to the concept. Fifth, it must invest in economic reform and domestic institutional capacity in order to increase the hedging space as the dependence decreases.

Conclusion

This article has contended that the Indo-Pacific, as materialised in the Quad and AUKUS, is mediated in South Asia by pre-existing rivalries and dependencies – not as a neutral organising frame. India has welcomed the Quad as a way to harness capability and bolster its status without being tied up in an alliance like AUKUS, which they are wary of. Pakistan has hedged, albeit half-heartedly: vocal about its concerns, pro-China, yet also resuming ties with the United States and the Gulf nations, and embarking on inclusive maritime diplomacy. The smaller states have taken an architecture agnostic approach focusing on development and sovereignty.

Three conclusions follow. Analytically, the Quad and AUKUs should be understood as two separate and distinct entities, as it is one that triggers different types of response. But, in theory, hedging should be qualified by structural constraints set up by a near opponent and a strong patron. Pakistan's interest in the architectures is neither joining the architectures nor rejecting them completely, but moulding the maritime and non-proliferation agenda from within the Indian Ocean, where Pakistan has a legitimate voice due to its geography. The Indo-Pacific will remain a battleground and Islamabad's ability to leverage its territory into influence will rest on how well it can take the ball of reactive caution and make it an intentional and trustworthy plan.

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