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The Spatially Displaced Security Dilemma: Early Militarization and Crisis Stability across Indian Ocean Chokepoints

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ABSTRACT

The security-dilemma literature usually assumes that rivals build up capabilities in the same place, so that each side's deployments are visible to the other. This article argues that the assumption does not hold in the contemporary Indian Ocean, where states arm, garrison and survey chokepoints in peacetime, long before any crisis, and where rival capabilities often sit at different but functionally connected nodes of the same sea lines of communication. It introduces the spatially displaced security dilemma, a spiral of reciprocal insecurity in which rivals read each other's build-up at distant nodes as relevant to their own security. It specifies three conditions, collocation, offense–defense distinguishability and transparency, that determine whether such a dilemma stays stable or becomes dangerous. A qualitative comparison traces early militarization at the Strait of Malacca and the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels, with Hormuz as a contrasting collocated case. Displaced dilemmas prove crisis-stable while build-up is unilateral, incremental, public and distant from a rival's forward forces, but this stability is conditional and can erode as basing matures. The article draws implications for regional confidence-building and for Pakistan.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has become one of the most heavily militarized maritime spaces in the international system. A large share of the world's seaborne energy and container trade crosses it, and much of that traffic is funnelled through a handful of narrow passages: the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the channels that cut through India's island chains (Kaplan, 2010; Till, 2013). Over the past two decades, littoral and extra-regional states have equipped these passages with naval bases, air stations, coastal missile batteries, radars and surveillance networks, in most cases long before any of them became a theatre of open conflict.

The stakes are easy to state. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA, 2024) estimates that oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz averaged 20.9 million barrels per day in 2023, equivalent to about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption, while an estimated 23.7 million barrels per day passed through the Strait of Malacca, the larger flow of the two. Rodrigue (2004) made

the underlying point earlier: because most petroleum moves by sea, a small number of straits and passages carry a disproportionate share of the world's energy supply, and their strategic value rises with the volume that depends on them.

The question matters beyond scholarship. A significant portion of the energy imports of South and East Asian economies, including Pakistan's, depends on sea lanes that run through these passages, and a crisis at any of them would be felt in Karachi as much as in Beijing or New Delhi. Understanding when build-up is stabilizing, rather than assuming that it never is, is therefore relevant to policy as well as to theory.

This article is concerned with that anticipatory build-up, which it calls early militarization: the incremental, peacetime acquisition of naval, coastal, basing and surveillance capabilities around a chokepoint before any overt crisis (Nasir, 2026). The puzzle is not why states fight over chokepoints in war, which naval history explains well, but why they arm them in peace, and whether doing so makes crises more or less likely to spiral.

The security dilemma is the obvious starting point. Since Herz and Jervis, scholars have understood that measures taken for defence can look threatening to others and provoke counter-measures, leaving everyone less secure (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). The idea has been applied to India–China maritime rivalry (Basrur et al., 2019; Tariq, 2016), although whether a genuine dilemma exists there is disputed. Brewster (2014) argues that India's strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean preclude a real Sino-Indian security dilemma, while Tariq (2016) concludes that one does exist but can be reduced if each side minimizes provocation. Part of that disagreement, this article suggests, reflects where analysts look. Yet standard formulations carry a tacit assumption about space: that rivals build up in the same place, or at least face each other across a frontier where each can see what the other is doing. Hormuz, where Iranian coastal forces and American naval power meet in a narrow channel, fits that picture. Much of the Indian Ocean does not.

In the eastern Indian Ocean, India has fortified island territories while China has secured port access along the northern rim of the ocean and built overland routes that bypass Malacca. Their forces are rarely in contact. Each nonetheless reads the other's moves, made hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, as bearing on its own security, because the locations are linked by the same lines of communication. This article calls the resulting pattern the spatially displaced security dilemma.

The article makes three contributions. It defines the concept and distinguishes it from the collocated, dyadic dilemma. It specifies three conditions, namely collocation, offense–defense distinguishability and transparency, which govern whether a displaced dilemma is crisis-stable. And it applies them to the Strait of Malacca and the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels, with Hormuz as a contrasting case. The central finding is that displacement can cushion crisis stability, because it removes immediate first-mover incentives, but the cushion is conditional. It lasts only while build-up remains unilateral, incremental and public, and does not converge on a rival's forward forces. The study complements the author's earlier work on the digital dimension of the security dilemma at Indian Ocean chokepoints by examining its spatial dimension (Nasir et al., 2026).

The next section reviews the security-dilemma and crisis-stability literatures and identifies their spatial assumption. Sections three and four develop the concept and describe the research design. Sections five to seven examine Malacca, the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels, and Hormuz. The remaining sections compare the cases, draw implications, including for Pakistan, and conclude.

The Security Dilemma and Its Implicit Geography

From Herz to the offense–defense balance

John Herz introduced the security dilemma to describe how states, uncertain about others' intentions, acquire means of security that others read as threats, setting off a spiral in which no one is made safer (Herz, 1950). Robert Jervis gave the idea its modern form by identifying two variables that determine how severe the dilemma is: whether offensive and defensive capabilities can be distinguished, and whether offense or defense holds the advantage (Jervis, 1978). Stephen Van Evera later showed how perceptions of the offense–defense balance shape the likelihood of war (Van Evera, 1998). Charles Glaser argued that the dilemma is not inescapable, since states motivated by security can sustain cooperation where capabilities are distinguishable (Glaser, 1997). Booth and Wheeler stress the role of fear, trust and interpretation, while Shiping Tang treats the dilemma as a structural situation rather than a mere spiral (Booth & Wheeler, 2008; Tang, 2009).

Two further strands of this literature matter for what follows. The first is psychological. In Jervis's (1976) account, decision-makers tend to see their own measures as defensive, to read a rival's measures as evidence of hostile intent, and to underestimate how their own behaviour appears from the other side; this is the core of what is usually called the spiral model. The second is the attempt

to define and measure the offense–defense balance. Glaser and Kaufmann (1998) ask how the balance can be specified and measured, and treat geography and military technology among its determinants. Both strands make the observer's information central: a dilemma is severe when each side cannot tell what the other's capabilities are for, and milder when it can. They give less attention to the prior question of where the observer sits in relation to the capabilities in question.

Crisis stability and the geography of exposure

Geography enters this literature mainly as a modifier of the offense–defense balance. Jervis and Van Evera list it among the factors that make conquest easy or hard (Jervis, 1978; Van Evera, 1998). What the classic formulations leave implicit is where the rivals' capabilities actually sit. The canonical examples are land frontiers and nuclear dyads, in which each side's deployments are visible to the other and the adversary is close enough to strike quickly. The spiral is assumed to run between forces in contact.

The literature on crisis stability inherits the same assumption. Following Schelling, a posture is crisis-stable when neither side gains from striking first and each can wait without being forced to act (Schelling, 1966; Snyder, 1961). The concept was built for superpower nuclear relations, and recent extensions, such as Acton's work on entanglement, remain concerned with dyads whose forces are mutually exposed (Acton, 2018). Applying the concept to multipolar maritime settings requires attention to who is exposed to whom, and where.

Acton's (2018) work on entanglement is instructive here because the assets at issue, dual-use command-and-control and early-warning systems, are often space-based or distant from probable theatres of conflict. Dual-use function and spatial distance are therefore already combined in the nuclear literature. The maritime case differs in that the nodes are physical places on a shared sea lane and the actors are multipolar conventional powers rather than a nuclear dyad.

Posen's (2003) distinction between command of the commons and the contested zones in which weaker adversaries can still resist suggests a related analogy. The open ocean is difficult to contest, whereas narrow passages, littoral approaches and island chains are the places where comparatively cheap systems can still threaten a stronger navy (Krepinevich et al., 2003). Chokepoints are, in this sense, where command of the sea is most contestable, and so where the structure of a security dilemma matters most.

Maritime power, chokepoints and the Indian Ocean

The maritime domain complicates the offense–defense calculus further. Many of the instruments of naval power, such as bases, airfields, radars and ports, support both defensive and offensive tasks. Work on anti-access and area-denial capabilities shows how comparatively inexpensive systems can hold sea lanes at risk, so that a materially weaker state can threaten a stronger one's freedom of movement (Krepinevich et al., 2003). Sea control and sea denial are also not symmetrical in the way that land offense and defense are: a state that wants transit to continue and a state that wants to deny it may deploy identical equipment. For a security dilemma the practical consequence is that the signal value of any particular deployment is weak unless its context, including location, announcement and timing, reveals its purpose.

Maritime strategists supply the geography. Mahan and Corbett treated control of narrow passages as central to sea power, and Till and Rodrigue explain why narrowness and high-volume, low-substitutability trade make chokepoints strategically valuable (Corbett, 1911; Mahan, 1890; Rodrigue, 2004; Till, 2013). Studies of the Indian Ocean document the build-up in detail. Kaplan, Brewster and Medcalf trace the interplay of Indian, Chinese and American naval expansion (Brewster, 2018; Kaplan, 2010; Medcalf, 2020). Buzan and Wæver's regional security complex theory adds that great powers overlay regional rivalries, importing their own competition into local geography (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). A growing body of work applies the security dilemma explicitly to India China maritime competition, including the volume edited by Basrur, Mukherjee and Paul and Pakistani scholarship such as Sidra Tariq's reassessment of the String of Pearls narrative (Basrur et al., 2019; Tariq, 2016).

Within this body of work the central disagreement is whether competition between India and China has the structure of a security dilemma at all. Brewster (2014) argues that it does not, because India's strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean are large enough to prevent the kind of vulnerability that makes a dilemma severe, and because both states have good reasons to keep competition under control while they broaden their regional influence. Tariq (2016) reaches a different conclusion about existence but a similar one about management: a dilemma exists, yet it can be reduced by limiting provocation. Each reading is plausible for the locations it emphasizes. Brewster's draws on India's favourable position in the ocean, Tariq's on the way each side reads the other's port and naval activity. A framework that locates each rival's capabilities in space can accommodate both, because it asks at which node a dilemma operates and how stable it is there.

These literatures are indispensable but leave a gap. Studies of the India–China dilemma tend to treat it as a single, region-wide rivalry, while studies of individual chokepoints tend to treat each as a self-contained theatre. To the author's knowledge, little work asks what kind of security dilemma arises when rival capabilities are placed at different nodes of one connected network, and what that implies for crisis stability. The next section proposes an answer.

The Spatially Displaced Security Dilemma

Concept and scope conditions

A security dilemma is spatially displaced when three conditions hold. First, the rivals' security-relevant capabilities are located at different nodes of a connected maritime network rather than at a single contested point. Second, the nodes are functionally linked by a common line of communication, so that what happens at one affects the security of the others. Third, each rival draws inferences about the other's intentions from build-up at nodes it does not itself occupy. In such a case the spiral does not run between forces facing each other. It runs between positions that are separated in space and connected by inference.

Displacement should be distinguished from two neighbouring ideas. It is not the same as a multilateral dilemma, in which several dyads overlap at one site, although the two can coexist. Nor is it simply great-power overlay. Overlay explains why external powers appear in regional geography, whereas displacement describes the spatial structure of the resulting rivalry. The contrast case is the collocated dyadic dilemma, in which rival forward forces operate within mutual observation and striking range of the same passage.

Displacement is also distinct from proxy competition, in which rivals act through third parties, and from horizontal escalation, in which one side widens a conflict to new theatres. In a displaced dilemma the rivals act directly and in their own right, but at separate places, and the competition is still pre-crisis. The concept therefore captures a peacetime structure rather than a wartime strategy. It has scope conditions: it applies where the contested resource is a connected line of communication rather than a single territory, where at least two rivals possess capabilities able to affect that line, and where early militarization precedes open conflict.

Why distance cuts both ways

Displacement matters for two reasons that pull in opposite directions. Distance reduces immediate first-mover incentives. If forces are not within mutual reach, neither side can expect to disable the other quickly, and the compression of decision time that Schelling associated with instability is less severe. Distance also makes intentions harder to read. Because rival moves are not directly observable from one's own node, assessment relies on indirect cues, and ambiguity invites worst-case inference, as Mearsheimer's expectation that states respond to capabilities rather than declared intentions would predict (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Three transmission mechanisms

Three mechanisms transmit insecurity across space. The first is functional linkage: because the nodes share a line of communication, a rival's improved position at one node changes the expected cost of conflict at the others. The second is the substitution of signals. When rivals do not meet, they cannot read each other's intentions from direct encounters, so infrastructure announcements, exercises, port calls, survey-vessel visits and strategy documents become the evidence on which assessment rests. The third is cross-domain diffusion, in which a rival's behaviour on land or in another theatre is taken as indicative of its intentions at sea (Jervis, 1976). Each mechanism lengthens the chain between an action and its interpretation, and with it the opportunity for misperception.

Official strategy documents increasingly acknowledge this spatial structure. India's Navy Maritime Security Strategy of 2026, as summarized by A. K. Singh and Vignesh (2026), distinguishes an area of maritime interest, where developments may affect Indian interests, from an area of responsibility, where designated commanders plan and conduct operations. As those authors note, the distinction separates awareness from control and interest from assured capability. In the vocabulary of this article, it is a doctrinal statement that a state's security can depend on nodes it does not command.

Three conditions and three propositions

Three conditions determine which tendency prevails. Collocation is the degree to which a rival's forward-deployed capabilities converge on, or lie within range of, the same node. Collocation shortens warning time, exposes forces to pre-emption and creates the incentives that Schelling described. Offense–defense distinguishability is the extent to which capabilities at a node can be identified as serving assurance of transit or denial of it. Jervis's concern with distinguishability applies with particular force at chokepoints, where narrow geography lets sensors, coastal missiles, airstrips and ports serve both purposes (Jervis, 1978; Van

Evera, 1998). Transparency refers to the time profile and observability of build-up. Incremental, publicly announced and costly moves can function as signals of limited aims, a mechanism emphasized in work on trust and costly signalling, whereas sudden, concealed or crisis-compressed deployments do the reverse (Kydd, 2005).

Three propositions follow. P1: where capabilities at distant nodes are linked by common sea lanes, states will treat rival build-up elsewhere as relevant to their own node, producing a displaced spiral without direct contact. P2: a displaced dilemma will be crisis-stable when build-up is unilateral, incremental and transparent and is not collocated with a rival's forward forces, and crisis-unstable when capabilities are indistinguishable, collocated and compressed in time. P3: displacement is a transitional condition. As basing and logistics mature, rivals may converge on the same node, converting a displaced dilemma into a collocated one. This last proposition links the framework to power transition theory, which expects the risk of miscalculation to be highest when relative capabilities approach parity (Organski, 1958). Table 1 summarizes the indicators.

Table 1. Conditions and indicators of crisis stability in a displaced dilemma

Condition	Stabilizing value	Destabilizing value
Collocation	Rival forward forces at different nodes; no mutual striking range	Rival forward forces converge on one node; short warning time
Distinguishability	Assurance and denial roles can be told apart	Dual-use assets cannot be separated into defensive and offensive roles
Transparency	Unilateral, incremental, announced, costly signals	Sudden, concealed or crisis-compressed deployment

Each proposition carries observable implications that the case studies can check. If P1 holds, the discourse of each rival should link distant nodes, with official statements, strategy documents and expert commentary treating build-up elsewhere as relevant to the home node, and build-up should follow rival moves with a lag rather than coincide with local provocations. If P2 holds, periods of unilateral, announced and incremental build-up should not coincide with crisis behaviour such as alerts, forward deployments or declarations of exclusion, whereas the collocated case should show it. If P3 holds, evidence of rival forces approaching a common node, such as persistent naval presence at ports within range of an opponent's island positions, should precede any change in the character of signalling. Evidence that would count against the framework includes displaced build-up followed by crisis behaviour in the absence of convergence, or collocated build-up that remains stable because transparency is strong.

Research Design

Design and operationalization

The study uses a qualitative comparative design based on structured, focused comparison and process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005). Early militarization is traced at each case through the sequence of naval, coastal, basing and surveillance developments. Each case is then assessed against the three conditions and for crisis stability, which is judged by the presence or absence of first-mover incentives in the prevailing posture. Rapidly employable, denial-oriented and pre-emptive capabilities are treated as destabilizing, while slower, defensively postured capabilities that confer little first-strike advantage are treated as stabilizing.

The three conditions are operationalized qualitatively. Collocation is coded by asking whether a rival's forward-deployed combat forces, as opposed to commercial or logistical facilities, operate within mutual observation and striking range of the same node. Distinguishability is coded by asking whether the principal assets at a node can plausibly be assigned to assurance of transit or denial of it, taking geography into account. Transparency is coded by the extent to which build-up is announced, incremental and observable over time, as against sudden, concealed or concentrated in a crisis. Each case is coded on the same questions so that the results are comparable.

Case selection

Malacca and the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels are selected as displaced cases that differ in the number of actors and in the maturity of build-up: Malacca involves three littoral states and several external powers, whereas the channels involve largely

unilateral Indian development. Hormuz serves as a contrasting collocated case. The Six-Degree, or Great, Channel adjoins Malacca's western entrance, but the two cases are analytically distinct because they represent different nodes: the point of Chinese vulnerability and the point of Indian capability.

Three considerations guide the selection. First, the cases should vary on collocation, the condition most likely to separate stable from unstable outcomes. Second, they should lie on connected sea lanes so that cross-node inference is possible. Third, they should differ in the number of actors and in the maturity of build-up, so that the framework is not tested only where conditions are most favourable. The eastern cases and Hormuz meet these criteria. Bab-el-Mandeb, which figures in the author's thesis, is a candidate for later extension (Nasir, 2026).

Sources and limits

Sources include official documents such as the Indian Navy's 2015 maritime security strategy, scholarly and think-tank literature, and credible press reports. The study has limits. It relies on secondary and open sources, uses no interviews, and its classification of capabilities as offensive or defensive is interpretive. It is a plausibility probe for a new concept, not a test of it.

Because the cases are changing quickly, the evidence is drawn from three layers: official statements and strategy documents, specialist and think-tank analysis, and press reports used only for dated, verifiable events and flagged as reported where the sourcing is anonymous. Contested claims, such as the military purpose of Chinese port investments or the scope of Indian access at Sabang, are treated as perceptions to be explained rather than as facts to be assumed, which is consistent with a framework about inference under ambiguity.

Malacca: Displacement at a Node of Vulnerability

The node of vulnerability and the Chinese response

The Strait of Malacca is among the busiest shipping lanes in the world and narrows to a few kilometres in the Phillip Channel near Singapore (Rodrigue, 2004). According to the EIA (2024), an estimated 23.7 million barrels of oil per day moved through the strait in 2023, more than through Hormuz. Sovereignty is shared among Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, none of which can alone guarantee the strait's security against great-power pressure. The strait acquired its strategic label in 2003, when China's leadership reportedly described its dependence on the passage as a "Malacca dilemma," the fear that a hostile power might interdict energy flows (Storey, 2006). Storey dates the concern to November 2003, when President Hu Jintao warned that certain major powers sought to control the strait and called for new strategies to reduce the vulnerability. The label has since structured Chinese strategic discourse and, equally important, the way others interpret Chinese conduct.

China's response has been to diversify rather than to confront. It has invested in ports and logistics along the northern rim of the Indian Ocean, including Gwadar, Kyaukphyu and Hambantota, built pipelines from the Myanmar coast to Yunnan, and modernized the People's Liberation Army Navy so that it can operate beyond coastal waters (Brewster, 2018; Kaplan, 2010; Storey, 2006). These moves are commonly grouped under the label String of Pearls, a term that is contested. Tariq argues that China lacks the logistical and strategic capacity to sustain a policy of encirclement, while many Indian analysts treat the pattern as evidence of intent (Tariq, 2016).

Competing readings and the Indian response

From Beijing's perspective the logic is defensive. A state that imports most of its oil by sea, and whose imports cross a strait it does not control, has reason to diversify its routes, to build the means to protect its shipping, and to worry that others might exploit the vulnerability. From New Delhi's perspective the same actions look different. Ports that may host Chinese naval vessels on the Indian Ocean rim, together with a rapidly growing blue-water navy, appear to be the early components of a presence that could one day constrain India. Both readings are internally coherent, and neither requires bad faith, which is what makes the situation a dilemma rather than a simple rivalry.

India's response has centred on its island territories. It established the Andaman and Nicobar Command in 2001, its first tri-service command, and in 2012 commissioned the naval air station INS Baaz at Campbell Bay on Great Nicobar (Brewster, 2018; Business Today, 2026). It has also cultivated access arrangements with littoral states, notably at Sabang in Indonesia and in Singapore, which extend its reach without establishing overseas bases (Maritime Executive, 2018; Shukla, 2018). The Indian Navy's 2015 strategy lists the eastern straits and approaches among its areas of primary interest (Indian Navy, 2015). Indian officials describe these steps as defensive hedging. Chinese commentary has tended to read them as an effort to hold China's energy lifeline at risk.

The access arrangements illustrate how ambiguity feeds inference. In May 2018 India and Indonesia announced a joint task force on port-related infrastructure in and around Sabang, off the northern tip of Sumatra, and the press described the plan as the development of a strategic Indonesian naval port (Maritime Executive, 2018). Shekhar (2020) argues that the "military base" and "access" narratives rested less on the leaders' joint statement than on an Indonesian minister's remarks about the depth of the port. A day after the Jakarta visit, India also signed a logistics support agreement with Singapore that allows Indian warships to replenish there (Shukla, 2018). Whether these arrangements amount to a forward naval presence or to commercial and logistical convenience is exactly the kind of question that observers in Beijing must answer from a distance, and the answer is likely to depend as much on prior beliefs about Indian intentions as on the texts of the agreements.

Displacement and ambiguity at Malacca

Malacca exemplifies displacement. The Chinese vulnerability is located at the strait itself, the principal Indian capabilities are on islands at its western approaches, and Chinese counter-measures lie on the rim hundreds or thousands of kilometres to the west and north. No Chinese combat forces are forward-deployed at Malacca, and no Indian forces are stationed at Gwadar or Kyaukphyu. Yet each side interprets the other's moves as relevant to the strait. New Delhi reads port investments as potential naval access, and Beijing reads the Andaman build-up as a means of closing the strait to it.

Offense–defense ambiguity is pronounced because the instruments are dual-use. A container terminal can be a commercial investment or a wartime logistics hub, and an air station can monitor shipping or enable interdiction. Glaser's analysis suggests that where offensive and defensive postures cannot be told apart, states struggle to signal benign motives, and Mearsheimer's expectation is that they respond to capabilities (Glaser, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001). The strait also lies at the junction of the South Asian and Southeast and East Asian security complexes. The United States, Japan and the littoral states have their own interests there, so the displaced India–China dilemma coexists with other dyads that converge on the same waters (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The littoral states are not passive in this configuration. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have invested in their own monitoring and patrol capacity (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2016) and hedge between the great powers, welcoming partners from several directions while avoiding exclusive alignment. The Malacca Straits Patrol, whose terms of reference and standard operating procedures were signed by Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in April 2006 and which Thailand joined in 2008, combines coordinated sea patrols, "Eyes in the Sky" air patrols and an intelligence exchange group (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2016). This matters for the framework in two ways. Their sovereignty restricts what any external power can do at the strait itself, which is part of the reason rival build-up is displaced to the approaches and the rim rather than concentrated on the strait. And their own surveillance and incident reporting give all users some picture of activity, adding a layer of transparency.

Assessment by the three conditions

By the three conditions, the Malacca configuration is relatively stable. Collocation is low, since neither side has combat forces forward-deployed at the other's node. Transparency is moderate: Indian command and basing developments are openly acknowledged and Chinese port investments are publicly announced, but their military potential is contested. The littoral states, which have no territorial dispute with either great power and share an interest in keeping the strait open, act as a brake. Closing it would harm China, India, the United States and the littorals alike, and this mutual vulnerability dampens first-mover incentives.

The role of extra-regional powers deserves emphasis. The United States and Japan have long-standing interests in the freedom of navigation through Malacca, and their partnerships with littoral states and with India mean that the strait is the meeting point of several overlapping rivalries. This does not alter the displaced character of the India–China dilemma, but it increases the number of actors whose build-up and signals must be interpreted, and so raises the premium on transparency. A multilateral setting dilutes first-mover incentives for any single power while multiplying the sources of ambiguity, which is part of the reason Malacca is best described as stable but fragile.

The stability is nonetheless conditional. China's navy is still developing its capacity to operate far from home. If access at Kyaukphyu or Gwadar matures into persistent naval presence within reach of Indian island positions, the displaced dilemma could acquire a collocated core. Power transition theory warns that the danger of misjudgement is greatest as relative capabilities converge (Organski, 1958). Malacca therefore occupies a structurally contingent midpoint, stable today but dependent on the pace and location of Chinese consolidation.

The Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels: Displacement in Its Purest Form

Incremental and public build-up

Two channels bracket India's island territories. The Nine-Degree Channel separates Minicoy from the rest of the Lakshadweep group in the Arabian Sea and lies across heavy east–west traffic. The Six-Degree, or Great, Channel runs between the Nicobar Islands and Sumatra and forms the western entrance to Malacca. Together with the neighbouring Eight-Degree and Ten-Degree Channels, they form a chain of gaps in the sea lanes between the Gulf and East Asia, overlooked by Indian possessions (Brewster, 2018; Kaplan, 2010). They are not top-tier energy chokepoints in the manner of Hormuz or Malacca, but they sit on the same sea lanes, and this makes them the clearest instance of anticipatory build-up in the thesis from which this article derives (Nasir, 2026).

The development has been incremental and largely public. A small naval detachment at Minicoy long remained a modest outpost until its elevation to a naval base in 2024 (Press Information Bureau, 2024). The Andaman and Nicobar Command was created in 2001 and expanded gradually, and INS Baaz opened in 2012 (Brewster, 2018; Business Today, 2026). After the 2020 clashes with China along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, Indian threat perceptions shifted further towards the maritime domain, and the pace of development increased. Press reports in the months after the Galwan clash described the navy deploying frontline vessels along the Malacca approaches near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (National Interest, 2020). In March 2024 the navy commissioned INS Jatayu at Minicoy as its second naval base in Lakshadweep, after INS Dweeprakshak at Kavaratti (A. Singh, 2024; Press Information Bureau, 2024), and the press described the new base as straddling the Eight-Degree and Nine-Degree Channels (Ray, 2024). Indian commentary presents the two island groups as eyes and ears flanking the northern Indian Ocean, from which Chinese shipping and naval movements could be monitored and, if necessary, interdicted (A. Singh, 2024; Ray, 2024).

The pattern continues in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In December 2025 reports described work beginning on a second airfield on Great Nicobar, near Chingen and Galathea Bay to the south of INS Baaz, alongside expansion work at the existing naval air station (Swarajya Staff, 2025). By June 2026 the government was reported to have decided to build a new civil–military airport at Chingen, at a cost of about ₹13,000 crore, rather than extend the INS Baaz runway from roughly 4,500 feet to nearly 10,000 feet, an extension that terrain had made difficult (Business Today, 2026). The facilities are public, the decisions are reported openly, and the dual civil and military character of the new airport is stated rather than concealed. In April 2026 the Indian Navy also published a new maritime security strategy, which A. K. Singh and Vignesh (2026) read as a refinement rather than a break with earlier documents, with greater attention to competition below the threshold of open conflict. Taken together, these steps fit the profile of unilateral, incremental and announced build-up that the framework associates with stability.

Inference without contact

No Chinese action in the channels themselves triggered this build-up. Process tracing points instead to a land-border crisis that prompted Indian planners to reassess Chinese intentions in another domain. This is what a structural realist reading would expect: once a rival has used force in one arena, its intentions are inferred for all (Mearsheimer, 2001). The case shows a displaced dilemma in near-pure form. India builds at its own islands in response to Chinese capabilities elsewhere, chiefly the rim access network discussed above and, increasingly, visits by Chinese research vessels and submarines in the eastern Indian Ocean. China has not built comparable facilities near the channels, so India answers an indirect, inferred threat.

India's own rationale combines defensive and more ambitious elements. Its maritime strategy casts the Indian Ocean as a primary area of interest and its island territories as natural platforms for surveillance and for protecting sea lanes (Indian Navy, 2015). Indian planners are also aware that the same platforms give India leverage over traffic on which China depends, a point that Chinese analysts have not missed. India may sincerely seek to monitor and protect, while China sincerely perceives a potential means of interdiction.

Distinguishability is low in capability terms, since surveillance and air facilities that monitor traffic in peacetime would enable interdiction in a crisis. What differs from Malacca is transparency. India openly acknowledges the dual-use character of the facilities and publicizes their development, which makes the build-up costly, observable and hard to disguise.

Chinese activity near the channels has so far taken forms that fall short of permanent basing. Research and survey vessels, submarine deployments and port calls in the eastern Indian Ocean have been reported by Indian and Western analysts, and Indian planners interpret them in light of the rim access network (Brewster, 2018). Beijing characterizes such activity as a legitimate use of the high seas and as protection of its own shipping, including through anti-piracy deployments. The difference between

permanent facilities and episodic presence is central to the framework. Permanent facilities would constitute collocation, whereas episodic presence leaves the dilemma displaced but adds to India's uncertainty about where the threshold lies.

Assessment and cautions

By the three conditions, this is the most stable of the displaced cases. Build-up is unilateral and incremental, there is no collocation with Chinese forward forces, and announcements and ministerial visits provide costly, public signals that reduce uncertainty about India's aims (Kydd, 2005). The absence of a rival presence also means there is no first-mover incentive of the kind found where adversaries operate in close contact.

Three cautions apply. First, India's blue-water navy is still in development while China's is more established but logistically stretched, a configuration in which power transition theory expects miscalculation risk (Organski, 1958). Second, if China builds sustained logistical support near the eastern Indian Ocean, a unilateral posture could become bilateral and collocated, converting a displaced dilemma into something closer to Hormuz. Third, the explicit link between the maritime posture and the unresolved Himalayan border means that a crisis on land could tempt planners to use maritime leverage coercively, taking the dilemma beyond chokepoint-specific stability. The stability of the case is, in part, a function of its immaturity.

Hormuz: The Collocated Contrast

Hormuz shows the opposite end of the spectrum. The strait is only a few dozen kilometres wide at its narrowest and carries a significant share of the world's oil (Rodrigue, 2004); oil flows through it averaged 20.9 million barrels per day in 2023, about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption (EIA, 2024). Iran, whose coast dominates its northern side, built up over decades an asymmetric capability of mines, fast attack craft and anti-ship missiles after the United States inflicted heavy losses on its conventional navy in Operation Praying Mantis in 1988 (Krepinevich et al., 2003; U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, n.d.). That operation, launched on 18 April 1988 in retaliation for a mine strike on the frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts four days earlier, destroyed two Iranian surveillance platforms, sank two ships and severely damaged a third (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, n.d.). The United States has kept naval forces in the Gulf for decades, including the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain. These forces operate within observation and striking range of one another in confined waters. Collocation is complete.

Distinguishability is low in a different way. Geography makes the denial capability of coastal missiles and mines decisive, because the narrowness of the strait places transit lanes within range of shore-based systems. What Iran presents as defensive is, from Washington's perspective, an offensive threat to transit. The posture is also crisis-compressed: dispersed, rapidly employable systems reward striking first. These features have been on display in 2026. After American and Israeli strikes on Iran on 28 February, Iranian authorities declared the strait closed to American ships, and the Revolutionary Guards navy announced closures on several further occasions, including in April and July, while American forces conducted strikes in response (Al Jazeera, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

The effect on energy flows has been large. In its August 2026 short-term outlook, as reported by Rigzone (2026), the EIA estimated that crude oil and petroleum liquids moving through Hormuz averaged 4.9 million barrels per day in the second quarter of 2026, compared with an average of 21.6 million barrels per day in the fourth quarter of 2025, before the conflict began, and it assumed that shipments would remain severely constrained. These figures indicate the severity of the crisis rather than measure stability, but they illustrate what is at stake in collocation: where rival forces share a confined passage, the passage itself becomes the object of the dilemma.

Three features explain why Hormuz is collocated rather than displaced. The principal rival has a coastline that commands the strait itself, so its capabilities need not be placed at a distant node to affect the passage. The rival guarantor, the United States, has chosen to station forces in the same confined waters in order to assure transit, so that both sides' deployments occupy the same node. And there is no functional substitute for the passage, which removes the option of relocating the competition to a less exposed place. Where those features are absent, as in the eastern Indian Ocean, distance becomes available as a buffer.

This pattern of action, reaction and closure is what the framework predicts when collocation, ambiguity and compressed decision time coincide. The contrast with the quieter displaced cases also clarifies that it is the configuration of build-up, rather than its volume, that matters. Hormuz is at least as heavily militarized as the eastern Indian Ocean, yet it is the case in which crisis stability has collapsed.

Comparative Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the three cases against the framework.

Table 2. Comparative assessment of the three cases

Case	Dilemma form	Collocation	Distinguishability	Transparency	Crisis stability
Malacca	Displaced, multilateral	Low, but may rise	Low (dual-use ports)	Moderate	Relatively stable, contingent
Nine/Six-Degree Channels	Displaced, unilateral	Low	Low (dual-use sensors, airfields)	High	Stable, but immature
Hormuz	Collocated, dyadic	High	Low (geography favours denial)	Low in crisis	Unstable

Table 3 places the principal developments discussed in the case studies on a common timeline. The sequence shows that Indian and Southeast Asian measures in the eastern Indian Ocean accumulated gradually and in public over two decades, whereas the Hormuz crisis of 2026 unfolded within months, after a long period in which Iranian and American forces had faced each other in the same waters.

Table 3. Selected milestones in early militarization and crisis, by node

Year	Development	Node	Source
1988	Operation Praying Mantis: U.S. Navy strikes Iranian naval forces in the Gulf	Hormuz	U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command (n.d.)
2001	Andaman and Nicobar Command established as India's first tri-service command	Malacca approaches	Business Today (2026)
2003	"Malacca dilemma" articulated in Chinese leadership discourse	Malacca	Storey (2006)
2006	Malacca Straits Patrol terms of reference signed (Thailand joins in 2008)	Malacca	Singapore Ministry of Defence (2016)
2012	INS Baaz commissioned at Campbell Bay, Great Nicobar	Malacca approaches	Business Today (2026)
2015	Indian Navy publishes Ensuring Secure Seas	Eastern Indian Ocean	Indian Navy (2015)
2018	India–Indonesia task force on Sabang; India–Singapore logistics agreement	Malacca	Maritime Executive (2018); Shukla (2018)
2020	Galwan clash; reported Indian naval deployments near Malacca approaches	Channels and Malacca	National Interest (2020)
2024	INS Jatayu commissioned at Minicoy	Eight- and Nine-Degree Channels	Press Information Bureau (2024); Ray (2024)
2025	Work reported on a second airfield on Great Nicobar	Six-Degree Channel	Swarajya Staff (2025)

2026	Hormuz closures announced; oil flows fall sharply; new Indian maritime strategy (April); Great Nicobar civil–military airport decision (June)	Hormuz; channels	Al Jazeera (2026); Reuters (2026); Rigzone (2026); A. K. Singh & Vignesh (2026); Business Today (2026)

Two features of the timeline are worth noting. Build-up in the eastern Indian Ocean is staggered across nodes and actors, with Indian, Chinese and Southeast Asian measures rarely coinciding in time or place, so that each step can be read, and answered, in isolation. At Hormuz, by contrast, action and response are compressed into days or weeks. The contrast in tempo is part of what the transparency and collocation conditions are meant to capture.

Three points emerge. First, the cases support the claim that displacement is a distinct form of dilemma (P1). In both eastern cases, rivals read each other's build-up at other nodes as relevant to their own, in the absence of direct contact. The Indian build-up at the channels responds to Chinese capabilities elsewhere, and Chinese port access is read in New Delhi as bearing on Malacca. At Hormuz, by contrast, the dilemma runs between forces in direct contact.

Second, stability depends on the three conditions rather than on the level of militarization (P2). The crude realist expectation that more build-up produces more instability is not supported. The Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels have seen sustained, even accelerating, build-up and remain stable, while Hormuz, with comparable or heavier militarization, is the least stable case. What differs is collocation, the time profile of deployment and the observability of intent. The finding fits chokepoint theory, since narrowness amplifies the importance of distinguishability, and regional security complex theory, since external powers shape which nodes become contested (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Rodrigue, 2004).

Third, displacement is conditional and can be converted (P3). Both displaced cases depend on the absence of collocation, and the principal route to conversion is the maturation of Chinese basing near Indian island positions. Displacement therefore works as both a buffer and a blind spot. It buys time by keeping forces apart, but it leaves each side dependent on inference about the other's distant moves, which makes transparency the main lever available to policymakers. Power transition theory supplies the timing: the risk is greatest while relative capabilities converge (Organski, 1958).

Several alternative explanations deserve consideration. One holds that the stability of the eastern cases simply reflects India–China nuclear deterrence, which makes escalation unlikely. Nuclear deterrence may restrain both, but it does not explain variation across chokepoints, and it does not constrain Iran and the United States in the same way at Hormuz. A second attributes variation to the intensity of the underlying political dispute: Hormuz involves open hostility, while the eastern Indian Ocean involves strategic competition without it. This is plausible, but it leaves open why the same competition could become unstable if basing converges, which the collocation condition explains. A third points to domestic and bureaucratic interests in naval expansion. These factors surely influence the pace of build-up, but the framework addresses its consequences for stability rather than its causes. The three conditions do not replace these accounts. They specify the spatial and informational mechanisms through which build-up, whatever its origin, affects crisis stability.

The findings refine two bodies of theory. For the security-dilemma literature they suggest that location should be treated as a variable alongside distinguishability and the offense–defense balance, rather than as a background condition. The severity of the dilemma depends not only on what capabilities exist and what they signal, but on where they sit relative to a rival's. For the crisis-stability literature, the cases suggest that Schelling's concern with first-mover incentives can be extended to conventional, multipolar maritime settings, provided that exposure is understood spatially. The relevant question is which forces can reach which nodes, and in what time (Jervis, 1978; Schelling, 1966).

The comparison carries limits that should be stated plainly. Three cases cannot establish the generality of the propositions, and the cases differ in more than their collocation: Hormuz involves open hostility and a coastal state whose territory commands the strait, whereas the eastern cases involve strategic competition between states with no common frontier at sea. The framework therefore claims plausibility rather than proof. Its value at this stage is to organize observations that existing accounts treat separately and to generate indicators that can be checked as the cases evolve.

Implications for Regional Stability and for Pakistan

The analysis suggests that policy should focus on the conditions of build-up rather than its volume. Three practical implications follow. First, states have an interest in keeping major deployments unilateral, incremental and public, for instance by announcing basing decisions and significant force changes in advance. Costly, observable moves communicate limited aims more credibly than assurances (Kydd, 2005). Second, the ambiguity of dual-use infrastructure feeds displaced inference, so clarifying the civil or military character of ports, airstrips and surveillance facilities can reduce worst-case reasoning. Third, observers and policymakers should treat the approach of rival forward forces to a common node as a threshold that warrants dialogue. For the eastern Indian Ocean, persistent naval access near India's island positions is the most important indicator.

A practical corollary is that analysts and officials can monitor a short list of indicators rather than aggregate force levels. In the eastern Indian Ocean the most important are persistent naval presence, as opposed to commercial access, at ports within reach of Indian island positions; the basing of long-range surveillance or strike aircraft at forward Indian airfields such as those planned on Great Nicobar; and any shift from announced, incremental development to sudden or concealed deployment. Each corresponds to one of the three conditions, and each is observable in open sources.

The framework has particular relevance for Pakistan. Gwadar sits on the northern rim of the displaced chain and is frequently discussed in Indian and Western analysis as a potential node of Chinese access, although Pakistani and Chinese officials describe it as a commercial project (Brewster, 2018; Kaplan, 2010). Whatever the intention, the ambiguity of dual-use infrastructure is precisely what feeds displaced inference. Pakistan therefore has an interest in managing how the node is perceived. Being open about the civil character of port facilities, communicating naval activity and exercises where possible, and avoiding arrangements that make the port appear to be a forward base would reduce the risk that Pakistan is cast as a link in a displaced spiral directed against India. Such steps cost little and protect the stability on which Pakistan's own maritime economy depends.

India's own choices matter as much as China's. Publicly distinguishing the civil and military components of projects such as the Great Nicobar development, and explaining to neighbours the difference between areas of interest and areas of responsibility, would help observers separate surveillance and assurance from interdiction. The reported choice of a civil–military design for the new Great Nicobar airport (Business Today, 2026) is a reminder that dual use is built into the design of such facilities and that how it is described is a policy choice.

China, for its part, can reduce displaced inference by being explicit about the commercial or military status of port investments on the northern rim of the ocean and by publicizing the scope and duration of naval deployments, including anti-piracy and survey activity. The Chinese position is that such activity is a legitimate use of the high seas and a protection of its shipping, and stating clearly what it does and does not involve would cost little.

The littoral states of Malacca and the states adjacent to the eastern island chains have a distinct role. Because their sovereignty and cooperation determine what external powers can do, they are well placed to promote transparency in the waters they control, for example through information-sharing on shipping and incidents that is open to all users. Extra-regional powers, including the United States and Japan, should recognize that expanding their own deployments in the eastern Indian Ocean can alter the collocation calculus for India and China alike, and should weigh the stability costs of doing so against the reassurance benefits.

These recommendations are modest by design. Rivals with deep mutual suspicion are unlikely to accept intrusive verification, and the framework does not assume that they will. Its claim is narrower: that choices about the location, pace and publicity of build-up are available to every state, and that they affect the probability of crisis even in the absence of formal arms control. Measures that are unilateral, incremental and public are within each state's own control, which is why they are more realistic than negotiated restraint in a region without an inclusive security architecture.

Limitations and Conclusion

The study has limits that point to further research. Its evidence is drawn from open and secondary sources, and it uses no elite interviews, which would help distinguish stated policy from planners' reasoning. The classification of capabilities as offensive or defensive is interpretive. The concept has been explored in two displaced cases and one contrast, so the propositions are plausible rather than confirmed. Future work could test them on other chokepoints, such as the Sunda and Lombok Straits and the Mozambique Channel, and could model displaced dilemmas formally using network methods that capture security relations along a chain of connected nodes. The stability of the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels will itself be tested as Chinese basing develops. A further limitation is temporal. The cases are changing quickly, and developments after the period of data collection, especially at

Hormuz in 2026, may alter the assessment, so the framework is best read as a lens for tracking these changes rather than as a settled verdict.

A further limitation concerns the evidence on Indian doctrine. The analysis relies on the 2015 maritime strategy, which was followed in April 2026 by a new Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy. The secondary assessment cited here describes the new text as a refinement rather than a rupture, with continued emphasis on competition below the threshold of open conflict and on the distinction between interest and responsibility (A. K. Singh & Vignesh, 2026), but a full reading of the document may refine the coding of transparency for the Nine-Degree and Six-Degree Channels. Some evidence on Indian deployments after 2020 also rests on press reports attributed to unnamed officials, and it has been treated accordingly. Finally, coding by a single researcher invites bias, and future work could test inter-coder reliability and confront the framework with Brewster's (2014) argument that India's structural advantages prevent a genuine dilemma from forming.

This article has argued that security dilemmas at sea are not always collocated. Where rivals place capabilities at different but connected nodes, a spatially displaced dilemma arises in which each side infers the other's intentions from distant build-up. Such a dilemma can be crisis-stable, because distance removes immediate first-mover incentives, but only while build-up is unilateral, incremental, transparent and not collocated with a rival's forward forces. When capabilities become indistinguishable, collocated and compressed in time, as at Hormuz, stability collapses. Displacement is therefore a transitional condition, and the central question for the Indian Ocean in the coming decade is whether major and middle powers learn that the danger lies less in the build-up itself than in its collocation, its opacity and its compression in a crisis.

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