India's Evolving Strategic Maritime Thought: Blue Water Aspirations and Challenges

Muhammad Azam Khan* **and Aiysha Safdar****

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About blue water navy

Like the term 'terrorism' there is no universally accepted definition of a 'blue water navy'. However, there exists a broad consensus amongst scholars who describe it as specific naval 'means' along with the 'ability' to perform. Put simply:

"It refers to the ability of a navy to sustain a broad range of maritime operations across the open ocean. A blue water navy is the one able to operate in blue water, and thus beyond the coastal or littoral regions and beyond the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In practice, the term 'blue water' tends to apply to those navies with a balanced range of capabilities to operate across the open oceans. Such navies usually have the capacity of sea control and sea denial as well as power projection at great ranges and across deep water, and are also able to sustain these operations. A blue water navy allows a country to project power far from home and usually, but not necessarily, includes one or more aircraft carriers. Smaller blue water navies are able to dispatch fewer vessels abroad for shorter periods of time."[1]

Sea power

At a conceptual level, sea power is one facet of state power, used for safeguarding and pursuing any nation's vital interests in dealings with other countries.[2] According to Alfred T. Mahan, the intellectual father of the US navy, a nation's potential for sea power is the function of the following conditions:[3]

- Geographic position

* Muhammad Azam Khan is Senior Research Fellow at the Pakistan Navy War College. He is the principal author of the first Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan currently under final review at the Pakistan Navy Headquarters in Islamabad.

** Aiysha Safdar is a Fellow at Pakistan Navy War College Lahore. She is currently pursuing her PhD on, "Power Politics in Indian Ocean" from the University of Punjab, Lahore.

- Physical conformation
- Extent of territory
- Number of population
- National character
- Character of the government

Sea power of a nation stems from its maritime potential. The navy of a country is the expression of its sea power. Complementing this nautical military power are the physical, geographic, and demographic features, as well as economic resources derived from or related to the sea, all of which are used in furtherance of national interests.[4]

Sea power accordingly involves military and civil maritime capabilities of a nation.[5] The expression is not only about what it takes to use the sea but also the capacity to influence behaviours of people, things, or events ashore by what one does at or from the sea. Sea power, however, is a relative concept with some countries having more than the others. This could be in the shape of naval strength, ship-building industry, manpower reservoir of seafarers, marine resources, off shore mercantile marine assets, or a combination of all these characteristics.[6]

Between Mahan and Corbett

For Mahan, amassing sea power meant more than raising and deploying navies or driving enemy fleets from the high seas. Writing in the 1890s, Mahan portrayed sea power as resting on 'three pillars' represented by international trade and commerce, naval and merchant shipping, and overseas bases. His contemporary Sir Julian Corbett—who scoffed at Mahan's work terming it 'shallow and wholly unhistorical'—preferred the term 'maritime', which carried both military and non-military connotations to the term 'naval', more common in Mahan's writing, despite his avowedly broad conception of sea power.

A maritime power, an expression used today for certain countries, implies a "naval power with a strong mercantile element."[7] It must, however, be understood that the term, maritime power does not only involve the 'naval and mercantile capacity' but the 'political will' to influence events in the maritime domain well beyond a nation state's territorial waters or even beyond its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The term is thus an amalgam of both the 'capability' and the 'political will'.[8]

Distinctly larger concept

Sea power is a distinctly larger concept than land power and air power. The term embraces the geo-economic dimensions of human activity which are neither covered by land power nor air power.[9] Unlike the army or the air force, whose size and firepower have to be related to that of potential adversaries, the size of navy is determined by the quantum of maritime assets and interests that a nation has to safeguard.[10] Sea power can be seen as a tight inseparable system in which naval power protects the maritime assets and trade, which are the ultimate source of a nation's prosperity and military effectiveness.[11]

As sentinels of the sea, navies at once protect, preserve, and advance a nation's maritime interests. Navies are also a powerful arm of any country's foreign policy besides being the instrument of diplomacy. They are uniquely placed to defend trade and their optimum utility is in time of peace. Investment in navies structured along systemic lines promises a massive return in the form of an extended and improving peace and prosperity.[12] While naval forces can be used to threaten an adversarial state's security, at a fundamental level sea power is relatively benign. Naval forces can generate security without threatening others' political or sovereign survival as may be the case with the intervention of ground forces.[13]

Emerging maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region

The international system is currently undergoing a momentous maritime shift. This transition is symbolized by two parallel unrelated events: the retreat of European states from the sea and the entry of Asian states into the oceanic arena.[14] The noted world historian Paul Kennedy points to a "remarkable global disjuncture" involving "massive difference in the assumptions of European nations and Asian nations about the significance of sea power, today and into the future."[15] He notes that Western capitals, with the exception of Washington, appear ready to abdicate their status as maritime powers, while Asian leaders seem eager to expend national treasure on building up their navies. As Kennedy readily concedes, the global implications of this apparent divergence are far from clear at the moment. The regional phenomenon in Asia, where closely clustered fleets of navies are growing at fairly rapid rates nearly simultaneously, raises some intriguing and troubling questions though.[16]

Be that as it may, international maritime security analysts now have consensus on one issue: the Indian and Pacific Oceans will witness an increasing contest for military dominance over the coming decades. In the past century, major Asian powers including China, Japan, and Russia repeatedly tried and failed to dominate their nautical environment militarily. The US navy succeeded in this role in the Pacific following the Second World War.[17] However, with major 21st century rising economies lying on the shores of Asia-Pacific and much of their energy needs being shipped from the Indian Ocean, the security landscape is speedily reshaping. The Asian waters promise to be the geostrategic locus of international politics in the 21st century. In the past two decades, more and more Asian countries have accordingly turned to sea.

The strength of navies in the Asia-Pacific region has increased in an unprecedented manner over the past two decades. Economic growth has swelled budgets, and navies have claimed a growing share of national expenditure to acquire new vessels and capabilities.[18] The US-based naval consultancy firm AMI International anticipates a naval spending in the Asia-Pacific of some US$170 billion by 2030.[19]

Table 1

Growth in Fleet Size - 2012

	US (Pacific Fleet)		China		India	
	Hulls	**Tonnage**	**Hulls**	**Tonnage**	**Hulls**	**Tonnage**
Ballistic missile-firing nuclear-powered submarine (SSBN)	8	152,000	4	32,100	0	0
Guided missile-firing nuclear-powered submarine (SSGN) / general purpose fast attack nuclear-powered submarine (SSN)	33	261,200	5	29,000	1	9,250
Diesel electric-powered submarine (SS/SSK)	0	0	55	142,900	14	38,600
Aircraft carrier (CV) / nuclear-powered aircraft carrier (CVN)	6	600,000	1	59,500	0	0
Support aircraft carrier with helicopters (CVS/H)	0	0	0	0	1	29,100
Pacific aerial surveys (PAS)	10	318,300	2	37,000	1	17,500
Cruiser (CC) / Destroyer (DF) / Frigate (FF)	59	487,300	75	266.000	22	110,200
Fleet Services (FS)	0	0	0	0	24	20,000
Total Subs	**41**	**413,200**	**64**	**204,000**	**15**	**47,850**
Total Surface	**75**	**1,405,600**	**78**	**362,500**	**48**	**176,800**
% Change 2000-2012	**8**	**6**	**-2**	**31**	**-6**	**10**
	6	**9**	**30**	**130**	**20**	**40**

Source: 'Asia's Naval Expansion–An arms race in the making?', IISS London, 2012, p. 35

Naval arms race is usually thought to increase the prospects for conflict. Rapidity in arms procurement and action-reaction dynamics may be necessary conditions for an arms race, but they are not sufficient. There also needs to be an intention, real or perceived, to use these increased capabilities against other states. The interstate disputes and tensions in Indo-Pacific Oceans could worsen by contests over islands, territory, and scarce resources including minerals and fisheries. The region's energy demand has also been rising by 3-5 per cent annually for the past 20 years and is higher than new supplies could be located.[20]

A2/AD vs Air-Sea Battle

Since the end of Cold War, the US navy and Marine Corps jointly produced a series of concepts, which brought them back to the centre stage of the US foreign policy. With the end of perceived tangible threat from the Soviet Union and classical Mahanian clash of forces on the high seas (or open ocean warfare challenge), the United States navy shifted focus to crisis-response and intervention in the Third World littorals. This led to emergence of new terms like 'littoral warfare' and 'expeditionary forces'.[21]

All these concepts were based on the premise that command of the littoral seas and the skies above from where power could be projected into areas of interest would vest with the United States forces. The phenomenal rise in China's economic clout and parallel increase in military muscle, particularly the PLA Navy, has now raised several questions about the unchallenged maritime supremacy of the United States. The US primacy in gaining access to areas of interest can no longer be taken for granted. Nor can the US maritime power be projected, any more, with impunity.[22]

In this context, two new operational concepts have emerged. Attributed to China, the terms 'anti-access' and 'area denial' are often combined to produce the abbreviation A2/AD. The former refers to actions and capabilities designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area. 'Area denial' on the other hand refers to those actions and capabilities which will limit the freedom of action of an opposing force that has already entered the operational area.[23] China's centrepiece in the current strategic calculus is DF-21D—a precision-guided, land-launched, anti-ship ballistic missile designed to reach surface targets at ranges greater than 900 nautical miles. Beijing is pursuing a missile-centric strategy with the purpose of holding US aircraft carriers at high risk if they operate in China's near seas, thereby hindering their access to those waters in the event of a crisis.[24]

Regardless, with the much touted US 'rebalance' or 'Asia pivot' policy having been announced in January 2012, and expanded upon at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2012, the sense of a competitive military relationship between China and the US has grown. The 'rebalance' has at its heart, the development of an operational concept known as 'Air-Sea Battle', which aims to deter, defeat, and disrupt 'anti-access' and/or 'area denial' capabilities. Although the US navy emphasizes that this is a concept and not a strategy and is not specifically aimed at China, it is widely seen as an American reaction to the development of China's asymmetric naval capabilities typified by submarines, anti-ship missiles, and small attack craft that seem designed to undermine the US Navy's substantial military advantages.[25]

The practical, immediate effect of Air-Sea Battle—which aims to develop networked and integrated aerial and naval forces to assure access against an adversary—will be to increasingly disperse US forward-deployed forces throughout the region, complicating China's ability to prevent their entry into a theatre (anti-access) and their freedom of movement once there (area denial). These developments reflect the burgeoning bilateral military rivalry developing between China and the US, even while their trade relationship continues to develop and deepen.[26]

The newest dimension: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The recently concluded US$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has caused considerable anxiety in New Delhi and Washington. The lynchpin of the project is Pakistan's port of Gwadar. Situated on the western fringes of Pakistan's Makran coast in Balochistan province, the port circumvents and significantly reduces China's strategic dependence on the Strait of Malacca. It also promises to open new vistas of trade for China through Pakistan's port. Gwadar will considerably reduce the distance for China to reach Europe, Middle East, and Africa by circumventing the Malacca Strait route.[27] The project, a network of road, rail, and sea routes, will simultaneously open wide ranging business and economic prospects in China's western province of Xinjiang and Pakistan's restive Balochistan province. The project's key western alignment from Gwadar to Khunjerab covers nearly 2,653 kilometres (km).

Some 1,000 km or 40 per cent of this network rests in Balochistan while 25 per cent (600 km) rests in KP province.[28]

In a survey carried out by the Americans in the early 1950s, Gwadar was declared as a natural warm and deep water port. It is a hammerhead shaped peninsula protruding at the apex of the Arabian Sea and at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. The port is just 180 nautical miles (nm) from the strategic Strait of Hormuz, and 405 nm and 76 nm from the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, respectively.[29] Government of Pakistan purchased Gwadar from the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman for US$3 million on 9 September 1958 after negotiations that lasted four years.[30]

Perturbed with the possible consequences of the CPEC, India has accelerated previous development work at Chabahar port. Located close to Gwadar port, Chabahar is a free trade zone port on the Makran coast of Sistan and Balochistan province of Iran. The port will provide India access to oil and gas resources of Iran and Central Asian states. New Delhi has already spent US$100 million to construct a 220 km road from Afghanistan's Nimroz province to this port. Chabahar provides India an easier land-sea route to Afghanistan.[31]

The two ports in the Arabian Sea, one in Iran and the other in Pakistan, demonstrate the emerging contest for power in the Western Indian Ocean. India fears that the location of Gwadar will allow Pakistan and China to exercise control over the world's most vibrant energy route and a facility to monitor naval activity in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Bulk of India's energy supplies transit via Hormuz. In this backdrop, India feels encircled and checkmated on land and seas by the China-Pakistan alliance. All along its western border, just a few hundred kilometres away, operates CPEC rattling the omni-presence of China-Pakistan alliance extending all the way to waters along its coast lines which renders its lands and shores vulnerable.[32]

Indian strategic thought and *Arthashastra*

Chanakya Kautilya or Vishnugupta (300 BC) was a Hindu statesman and philosopher. Born into a Brahman family, Kautilya received his early education in Taxila (Pakistan). He is known to have had knowledge of medicine and astrology, and believed to be familiar with elements of Greek and Persian learning introduced into India by Zoroastrians. Kautilya became a minister and an adviser to Chandragupta (321-297 BC), the founder of the Mauryan Empire of northern India. He was instrumental in helping Chandragupta overthrow the powerful Nanda dynasty. Kautilya wrote a classic treatise, *Arthashastra* (The Science of Material Gain).[33] The book came to be the principal guide for Chandragupta.

Written in Sanskrit, the *lingua franca* of his times, *Arthashastra* contains 15 sections. As a manual of statecraft, *Arthashastra* records the strategic and foreign policy practices. To Kautilya, diplomacy, statecraft, administration of the state, and the art of warfare were matters of vital importance requiring study, scientific analysis, and intelligent application.[34] Every situation demanded perceptive approach and solution, which could be

obtained through one of the stratagems or a combination of them: the *Sam* (conciliation or treaty), *Dam* (reward or money), *Dand* (punishment), and *Bhed* (dissension). The outcome of any strategic manoeuvre in Kautilya's estimate was to result in victory.[35]

Arthashastra encompasses a world of practical statecraft, not philosophical disputation.[36] The work sets out, with dispassionate clarity, a vision of how to establish and guard a state while neutralizing, subverting, and (provided opportune conditions) conquering the neighbours. For Kautilya, power was the dominant reality. It was multidimensional and its factors were interdependent. All elements in a given situation were relevant, calculable, and amenable to manipulation towards a leader's strategic aims. Geography, finance, military strength, diplomacy, law, agriculture, cultural traditions, morale and popular opinion, rumours and legends, and men's vices and weaknesses needed to be shaped as a unit by a wise king to strengthen and expand his realm—much like a modern orchestra conductor shapes the instruments in his charge into a coherent tune.[37]

Millennia before European thinkers translated their facts on the ground into a theory of balance of power, the *Arthashastra* set out an analogous and more elaborate system termed the 'circle of states'. Contiguous polities, in Kautilya's analysis, existed in a state of latent hostility. Whatever professions of amity he made, any ruler—whose power grew significantly—would eventually find it to be in his interest to subvert his neighbour's realm. This was an inherent dynamic of self-preservation to which morality was irrelevant.[38] In *Arthashastra*, the purpose of strategy was to conquer all other states and to overcome such equilibrium as existed on the road to victory.[39] More than ever before, *Arthashastra* today is the bible—the guiding spirit—of the Indian strategic community.

Naval warfare and *Arthashastra*

In what way will the Kautilyan worldview apply to the oceans is not much clear. Naval combat goes unmentioned in the *Arthashastra*. But K.M. Panikkar, India's astute pre-independence geopolitical thinker and a celebrated diplomat who remains a fixture in Indian strategic discourses, quotes Kautilya on the extent of the empire: "It should span the earth." Panikkar, however, also points out that for the Mauryan strategist, 'the earth' is the subcontinent, not the entire globe. Universal empire is thus confined to the Indian Landmass, remaining within the frontiers set by the Indian Ocean and the northern mountain ranges. On what should happen beyond those frontiers, *Arthashastra* is silent.

Do the expanses washing Indian shores fit into Kautilya's *mandala* (the system of developing, maintaining, or sustaining favourable contacts with other states) and thus into Indians' mental map of their geographic environs? Absent neighbouring states with defined boundaries, what would the circle of states look like at sea? Would it conform to the law of the sea, which partitions the oceanic domain into territorial sea, exclusive economic zones and the high seas? Or would it depend solely on each coastal state's naval power and thus its naval

reach in the Indian Ocean? If so, the system's geometry would fluctuate with other measures of national power, adding complexity to the *mandala.*[40] Regardless, under the incumbent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose views on Hindutva and fascist leanings are an open secret, an aggressive policy in the Indian Ocean is now surfacing rapidly.

The Indian Ocean under Modi

Panikkar was the most forceful proponent of Indian claim over the entire Indian Ocean. In his well-known treatise *India and the Indian Ocean* published in 1945, Panikkar makes a long-drawn case and touts why the Indian Ocean should remain 'truly Indian'. Not only that, he rejects pacifism and *Ahimsa*. "It is not for *Ahimsa* and pacifism that Ramchandra stands in Indian religion: it is for active assertion of what is morally right. Nor does Krishna stand for non-violence. 'Wake, be thyself, scourge thy foes' is the main teaching of Gita."[41] According to Panikkar, the Hindu theory at all times, especially in the periods of her historic greatness was one of active assertion of the right, if necessary through the force of arms.[42] It would not be wrong to assume that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean* will be the chief inspiration and powerhouse in guiding New Delhi's policy on Indian Ocean under Prime Minister Modi.

With the United States strategically backing India, Modi government has gone into an overdrive to accomplish its goal of regional domination. Contrary to the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government of Manmohan Singh, the Indian Ocean and its littorals are on top of New Delhi's policy under Modi.[43] The current diplomatic drive goes hand in glove with covert operations to destabilize regional countries, establish strategic military outposts in Indian Ocean islands, and an ambitious fast-paced expansion and modernisation of the Indian navy.

In March 2015, Prime Minister Modi took a whirlwind tour of Indian Ocean islands covering Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. It was a move designed to further India's longstanding desire to convert Indian Ocean into its sphere of influence.[44] Coming on the heels of President Obama's visit to New Delhi, Prime Minister Modi while in Mauritius could hardly conceal his government's intent to shape the security environment in the Indian Ocean. To the applause of India's foreign policy and security analysts, soon after commissioning India's first export warship, a 1,300 tonne patrol vessel Baracuda, he contended, "she [Baracuda] will be there to help in times of disaster and emergencies. But she will do more than that. She will also help make our Indian Ocean safer and more secure."[45] Mauritius, a strategically located island in the Indian Ocean has a vast 2.3 million square kilometres Exclusive Economic Zone. A base in the island effectively means India will have enormous strategic and military leverage against China and Pakistan.[46]

While in Seychelles, Modi laid out a fivefold framework for India's engagement with the Indian Ocean littorals. It includes securing India's mainland and island territories, deepening security cooperation, building multilateral cooperative maritime security, sustainable economic development,

and discarding India's longstanding reluctance to cooperate with other major powers in the Indian Ocean. In both Seychelles and Mauritius, Modi won agreements to develop infrastructure in the two islands that could also serve as military outposts.[47]

There is little doubt that Modi has taken a decisive break from the ambivalence of UPA government. It has come up with a crystal clear policy to dominate the Indian Ocean and its island territories, no matter what it takes.[48] Providing perpetual strength to Modi government's resolve is the US defence policy (the Asia pivot) that declares India as a "regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region."[49] If there was ever to be a truly determined drive to realize Panikkar's dream, it would perhaps be in the watch of Prime Minister Modi. Championing a domineering adaptation of puritanical Hinduism and drawing from sacred scripture Bhagvad Gita alongside the epic Mahabharata—the latter promoting war to exact revenge for injustice irrespective of blood necessary to be shed—this should come as no surprise. The denial of exclusive ownership of the Indian Ocean as deemed by New Delhi could be interpreted as injustice in this case.[50]

Challenges

Between aspirations and reality—the void

Any state that has both the 'capability' and the requisite 'will' to become a maritime power will almost certainly cast an impact on other coastal states. This could either be because of the coastal state's freedom in the use of the seas for own purpose or because of the aspiring power's ability to project power into the littorals. Maritime power and by extension maritime strategy is a tool of grand strategy that serves the ends of national security. It is hence natural for the maritime power to contribute to the accomplishment of national security objectives.[51]

Indian Ministry of Defence website lists seven national security objectives.[52] Founded on national interests, these objectives are summarised in the Indian Maritime Doctrine as follows:[53]

- Ensure security of national territory, territorial space, citizens, resources, and maritime trade routes;
- Maintain a secure internal environment to guard against threats to national unity, core values, and development;
- Strengthen cooperation and friendship with other countries to promote regional and global stability;
- Maintain a strong and credible defence posture, and capability to safeguard the national aim and interests.

Eminent scholars on Indian national security posit that the Indian grand strategy is premised on three concentric geographic circles: The inner most circle consists of India and its 'immediate neighbourhood'; the second or middle geographic circle consists of the so-called 'extended neighbourhood'; while the third circle constitutes 'the rest of the world'.[54] This construct is echoed in the Indian Maritime Military Strategy, the military dimension of India's maritime

strategy, which aims to synergise all aspects related to maritime activities.[55] The clear manifestation of inner most circle is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Four of the total eight members (Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) represent the adjoining maritime domains of India. Myanmar is not a member but India can bring maritime power to bear on it.

Analysts hypothesise that India's two goals in the inner circle are to seek primacy and to exercise a veto over actions seen as infringing on its interests. Primacy connotes to India's ability to impose its 'will', significantly influencing the actions of others.[56] The manner in which this primacy is likely to be exercised is articulated in Chapter 7 of the Indian Maritime Military Strategy for Employment, wherein New Delhi envisions conducting sea control and sea denial operations in wartime before taking part in joint operations. By supporting land and air forces, the navy would contribute directly to victory. As the Maritime Military Strategy notes, this would involve operating in enemy littoral zones.[57]

At the moment, however, India lacks the power-projection forces and lift potential to execute significant joint operations outside its immediate neighbourhood. Leaving aside Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, Pakistan remains the only neighbour with adequate potential to contest for control over Indian territorial waters. In the medium to long term, as China's naval capabilities expand, India may confront another challenge to its home waters.[58]

The second goal, that is, to veto detrimental actions by outside powers in India's immediate environs, has a distinct maritime dimension. India—and more precisely the Indian navy—carries the burden of history. During the 1971 war with Pakistan, the United States moved its carrier battle-group USS Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal. The move was seen by New Delhi as intimidating gunboat diplomacy.[59] It has left an indelible imprint on the Indian security mind, despite the fact that today the two navies are the closest allies.

Instead, New Delhi now fears PLA Navy as a contender. In no uncertain terms, the Indian Maritime Military Strategy predicts: "Chinese navy is set on the path to becoming a blue water force. It has an ambitious modernization programme. Notable amongst those are the renewed interest in aircraft carrier programme, the nuclear submarines, and the ballistic cruise missile projects along with attempts to gain a strategic toehold in the Indian Ocean region."[60] A military mission envisioned by Indian navy in the Indian Maritime Doctrine is to exercise sea control at the entry/exit points of the Indian Ocean region. Performing this mission would be a prerequisite for India to block Chinese ingress in the Indian Ocean or in other words, shutting China out of India's immediate neighbourhood. For now, however, this, at best, is an aspiration than a reality.[61]

The second or middle geographic circle consists of the so-called 'extended neighbourhood'—a rather amorphous area containing a significant amount of ocean expanse. Accordingly it could encompass the rest of continental Asia (beyond the immediate neighbourhood) as well as the Indian Ocean littoral. Again, it remains questionable as to how India would wield

power to protect its interests in this large continental and maritime expanse when hostility towards Pakistan drains so much of its resources.[62] The fiscal year 2015-16 Indian budget presented by the Modi government in February 2015 set aside US$40.4 billion for defence, showing an increase of 7.7 per cent over the previous year. While army accounts for 53 per cent of total defence budget, the share of air force and navy is 23 and 16 per cent, respectively.[63]

Despite the fact that Indian military acquisitions and posture is chiefly oriented towards Pakistan,[64] Chinese navy's advances in the Indian Ocean continue to rattle Indian strategic mind. As recently as June 2015, Indian media reported that a conventional type 039 Yuan class diesel electric-powered submarine with a crew of about 65 docked in Karachi harbour.[65] Equipped with torpedoes, anti-ship missiles, and air-independent propulsion that dramatically enhances the submarine's underwater endurance, it was neither the first nor going to be the last in the Indian Ocean. A Song class diesel electric-powered attack submarine docked in Colombo port in September 2014 greatly irking New Delhi.[66] China had previously indicated that its Type 093 Shang class nuclear-powered attack submarines would commence patrolling in the Indian Ocean, which Delhi sees as its natural domain. This raised fears in India that China could try to blockade the Indian coastline using nuclear-powered submarines.[67] Given these developments and a less than satisfactory state of its navy, India achieving unchallenged ascendancy in the middle circle is highly debatable.

The third circle, "the rest of the world" envisions India becoming a true world power and a heavyweight in matters of international peace and security. Quoting India's former prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, the foreword to the Indian Maritime Military Strategy states, "India's growing international stature gives it strategic relevance in the area ranging from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca."[68] In continuation, the introduction also echoes India's global interests where Dr. Singh proclaims, "current projections indicate that India will be among the foremost centres of power." He goes on to note that "military power will constitute a critical dimension of India's increased national power."[69] Both Indian prime minister and the epilogue[70] of the Indian Maritime Strategy remind the readers that the primary title of the strategy is 'Freedom to Use the Seas', something deemed critical if India is to realize its potential on the global stage. This 'freedom' obviously should be global in scope. In other words, India must possess both the 'will' and the 'capability' to contribute on the global plane. This requires amassing enough power-projection capabilities to reach beyond the Indian Ocean (farther than Malacca and Hormuz on either side of Indian shores).[71]

At a minimal operational level, this translates roughly into a combat potential to conduct simultaneous and sustained maritime military operations in more than one maritime theatre. A minimum of three carrier battle groups duly integrated with nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs/SSBNs) armed with submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) concurrently performing military operations in Indian and Pacific theatres should be the least required force structure. In other words, Indian navy must have the wherewithal,

endurance, and operational prowess to conduct sustained operations well beyond the Red Sea in the west and the South China Sea/Pacific in the East. While in the foreseeable future (next 10-15 years)—with the strategic military backing from the United States—India could earn a significant place in the western Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, it is exceptionally uncertain beyond those bounds.[72]

Strategic and doctrinal fault-lines

Influential strategists have argued in the past that India had problems in developing a robust security policy, including a strong military force, since the country is "bereft of coherent strategic thought."[73] Much of this is attributed to internal divisions within the society which left a small elite responsible for strategic matters. Former Indian defence and foreign minister Jaswant Singh says that unless India as a society comes together more effectively, it is unlikely to generate requisite military power to pursue an active security policy. Indian scholar Harsh Pant argues that in the absence of strategic thinking, economic growth has become a surrogate for national strategy.[74]

While the Indian navy operates fairly close to Indian shores, its leadership is utterly confused regarding a strategy towards Pakistan or China.[75] The Indian Maritime Doctrine and some previous policy documents do not suggest how Indian naval power could alter the balance with Pakistan or offset China's growing naval capacity. The Indian Maritime Doctrine further does not address how China's increasing forays into the Indian Ocean will be checked. Indian officials speak of the huge gap in terms of budgets and ship numbers between India and China. Others argue that India's advantage will be in advanced technology, not sheer numbers.

The Indian navy is currently the eighth largest in the world with a fleet of some 136 major vessels. It has a target of 200 major platforms in the next 10 years.[76] This includes raising the number of landing platform docks (LPDs) or amphibious assault ships from the current one (INS Jalashwa) to four more.[77] Also included is the plan for indigenous development of six nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs) and seven stealth frigates.[78]

China, on the other hand, with existing fleet of over 200 major warships is projected to have its navy grow to 351 ships by 2020. This includes an additional aircraft carrier and several cruisers armed with land-attack missiles, besides a number of nuclear-armed submarines (SSBNs). Chinese SSBNs are currently able to patrol with nuclear-armed JL-2 SLBMs, which can strike targets at more than 4,500 nm.[79] Reliable sources indicate that in the next 15 years, the PLA Navy's expansion will include 99 submarines of all types, four aircraft carriers, 102 destroyers and frigates, 26 corvettes, 73 amphibious ships (LPDs) and 111 missile craft.[80] The Indian navy has only 13 conventional-powered submarines and one under-trial nuclear submarine. China already has 51 diesel electric-powered submarines and has now announced that it will put five Type 094 Jin class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines into service in the near future.[81] Indian Maritime Doctrine deals with Pakistan indirectly as one of many littoral threats, and the Indian navy expects to assert control and

even project power into enemy land. To what extent this is feasible against a robust Pakistan navy is open to question.[82]

In this backdrop, both Indian and international scholars have roundly criticized Indian navy. They say, "The navy's inability to offer forthright responses to the challenges from China and Pakistan—the nation's primary external security challenges—mars its potential candidacy to be one part of the country's nuclear triad… Navy analysts and their supporters speak and write of a sea based deterrent, yet the inability to articulate a meaningful wartime role reduces the navy's political capacity to bargain for more resources and ultimately hurts its ability to pursue transformation."[83]

The hardware issues

Howsoever put, the early maritime vision outlined by Nehru and Panikkar was sea control which remained at odds with the reality of weak Indian naval capacity until 1971. But following the end of Cold War, the Indian navy became the first of the three services to adjust to geopolitical transformation.[84] Between 1986 and 1996, the Indian navy placed no new orders for principal combatants. During the 1990s it added five Kilo class Russian submarines, one corvette and one tanker. Later during 1997-2000, two more Kilo class submarines and three frigates were added.

The 1994 deal of an aircraft carrier is a tale of horror replete with snags and cost overruns. The handing over of the refurbished 44,500 tonne Kiev class carrier was not only delayed several times but the cost also escalated astronomically. When the final deal was signed in January 2004, the cost of overhaul was estimated to be around US$974 million. By 2007, Russia demanded a cost revision of US$2.3 billion with delivery deadline revised to November 2012. Today, despite being commissioned, the carrier is crippled to the extent where it cannot operate beyond 200nm of mother base at Karwar on the western coast south of Mumbai. Its integral fleet of Mig 29K fighter jets is facing take-off and landing problems and hence the carrier must stay close to shores.[85]

India's indigenously constructed 37,500 tonnes aircraft carrier (IAC) is also a sorry depiction of India's domestic military research and development. During the past two decades, IAC's launch has been deferred on several occasions. In 2011, the then Indian naval chief Admiral Nirmal Verma said that the IAC launch has been deferred from December 2010 to the latter part of 2011 due to shortfall of gearboxes and generators.[86] The IAC is expected to include the Indian naval version of Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) under production with Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). However, despite passage of around five years, the IAC has yet to be formally launched by the Indian navy. Similarly, there have been snags and cost overruns in other major projects as well.

Table 2

India Reveals Major Naval Programme Cost Overruns

Project	Units	Contractor	Date	Cost-overrun (as of 2011)	Original cost estimate
Kolkata (Project 15a) destroyers	3	Mazagon Dock	Started 1986. In service date 2011 to 2014	225%	USD500 million
Shivalik (Project 17) frigates	3	Mazagon Dock	Started 1997. In service date 2010 to 2011	260%	USD450 million
Kamorta (Project 28) Corvettes	4	Garden Reach	Started 2003. In service date 2012 to 2016	157%	USD600 million

Source: 'India reveals major cost overruns', *Janes Defence Weekly*, Vol. 48, No 32, 10 August 2011, pp.21.

The stricken submarine fleet

Indian navy's conventional submarine force is in precarious state. Several Kilo class Russian submarines in Indian naval inventory face technical problems. In 2013, one of the submarines sunk while in Mumbai harbour following an accident on board that caused a huge explosion. Another caught fire at sea in 2014 and ran aground.[87] More recently, at least one Indian naval chief had to resign following a series of accidents that hit the Indian navy.[88]

The acquisition of six new French Scorpene submarines has been delayed and deferred several times over the past decade. The first Scorpene boat is scheduled for commissioning in 2016. Under the agreement, one Scorpene submarine is to be constructed in France while the remaining will be built by Mazagon Dockyard Limited Mumbai. Each boat is expected to take 12 to 14 months for construction from the date of keel laying. Considerable delay cannot be ruled out, however, given the fact that even the first submarine is yet to be commissioned.[89]

Nuclear submarines

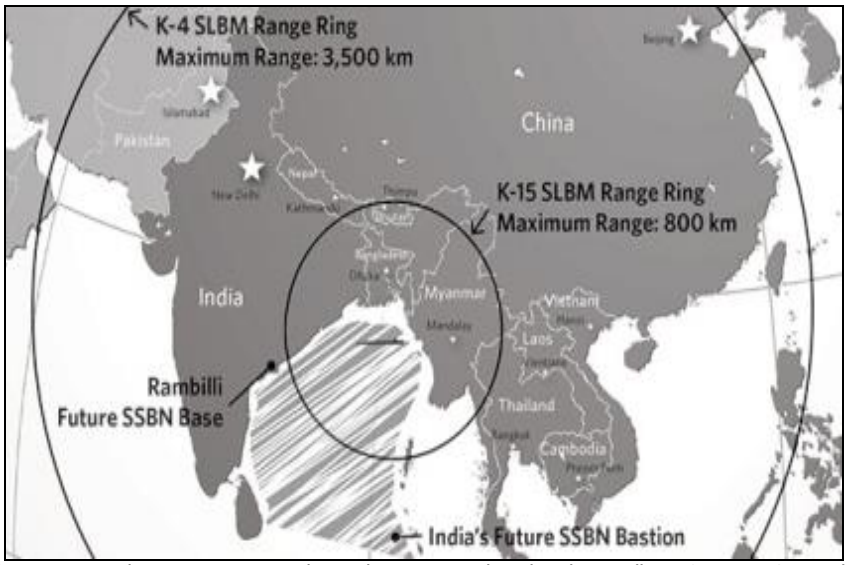
After a long wait starting in late 1980s, INS Arihant, India's locally constructed nuclear submarine was finally launched in July 2009. It has since persistently run into technical and operational problems. The high-tech vessel project, which has been in research and development for well over 22 years, has incurred exponential cost overruns and delayed delivery schedules on several occasions. Like several other projects, it is again a tale of poorly performing Indian defence and strategic organizations like the DRDO. The nuclear submarine only started sea trials as late as December 2014.[90]

But even when completed, the more cumbersome process of operational integration of Arihant into the country's strategic deterrence construct will commence. It will subsequently necessitate the mating of SLBMs with nuclear warheads to be deployed on the vessel to meet the requirements of Triad and 'credible minimum deterrence' (CMD) as articulated in the Indian Nuclear Doctrine.[91] Such a process may take several years if not a decade. And for a country that has never allowed serving defence personnel to sit in any of its national level security meetings, entrusting a fully mated nuclear warhead to a field commander (commanding officer of Arihant) remains to be seen.[92]

In the meantime, India's sea-based ballistic missiles, the submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), are creeping towards validation and achieving desired parameters after test firings. In January 2013, following some nine years in development, the DRDO conducted a successful test of the 750 km solid fuel nuclear-capable K-15 SLBM. K-4, a successor to K-15, was also secretly test-fired by India in March 2014. It is expected to have ranges in excess of 3,000 km.[93] But despite this impressive breakthrough, India's undersea missiles are not deployable weapons yet. These have to be first mated with the Arihant nuclear-powered submarine,[94] which is still far from over with its test trials, let alone operational integration. Thus even with fully developed SLBMs, their deployment depends on the successful operational induction of Arihant in the Indian fleet. As of June 2015, this is far from over.

Figure 1

SEA BASED MISSILES



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Conclusion

Despite seemingly dramatic increases in its defence spending, projected to go upwards of US$100 billion on modernizing its armed forces, the Indian military faces significant shortfalls. These run from strategy level thinking to structural and capability deficiencies. This precludes India from attaining any significant regional power status, let alone global, in the foreseeable future. The most visible manifestation of the Indian military 'hollowing out' occurred in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, when the then army chief General Deepak Kapoor was reportedly forced to admit to his country's political leadership that the Army "was not ready for war."[95]

Matters are even worse in the Indian navy. The navy's strategic capability to perform beyond immediate shores is severely curtailed. Due to schism in internal thinking, critical hardware issues, and problems with operational integration of weapon systems, the Indian navy's operations are considerably repressed. What's more, the increasing number of major accidents in the recent past raises several questions about its professional competence.

China's rapidly expanding navy and a small yet resilient navy of Pakistan continue to present India with a formidable challenge. India's geographic vulnerabilities include proximity of its major sea arteries and principal ports (like Kandla) to Pakistan, rendering them open to exploitation. In the short to medium term, India is set to accrue advantage of the strategic crutches provided by the United States. It will bolster its domestic military industrial base and improve its operational capability. But India's aspiration to boast a blue water navy remains a distant dream.

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