

EXAMINING INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE AND MARITIME DOCTRINAL GROWTH: THE INDO-PACIFIC IN PERSPECTIVE

UMM-E-HABIBA* AND MUHAMMAD AZAM KHAN**

Abstract

During much of the Cold War, New Delhi's strategic perceptions remained overwhelmingly land-centric. Maritime thinking and significance of naval power took a secondary spot in the Indian strategic and security perception. A surge in the country's economy and post-9/11 developments rapidly transformed the country's strategic culture. New Delhi placed a renewed focus on naval modernisation, while maritime thinking (strategy and doctrinal growth), as well as blue water naval ambitions, became pronounced. Indian Navy's role changed from mere coastal defence to power projection, at least in documents. This study analyses the burgeoning shift in Indian Navy's ambitions and maritime doctrinal growth in the backdrop of a new geographical construct, i.e., 'the Indo-Pacific'. It argues that although the force envisions itself as a key enabler of maritime power projection, there is a critical mismatch between the stated objectives and demonstrated maritime military potential. This is evident from several major accidents over the past few years and post-Pulwama standoff, which practically validated the void in Indian Navy's stated doctrinal philosophy and real combat potential.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific, maritime doctrine, naval forces, sea

* Ms Umm-e-Habiba is pursuing her doctoral thesis at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

** Muhammad Azam Khan is Senior Research Fellow at Pakistan Navy War College, Lahore.

power, strategic culture.

بھارت کے تزویریاتی افکار اور سمندری نظریہ کے نمو کا انڈو پیسفک کے نقطہ نظر سے جائزہ اُم حبیبہ اور محمد اعظم خان

خلاصہ:-

سرد جنگ کے دوران، نئی دہلی کا تزویریاتی ادراک زمینی سطح پر مرکوز رہا۔ سمندر کے بارے میں سوچ اور بحری قوت کو بھارت کے جنگی رویے اور سلامتی کے نظریے میں ثانوی اہمیت دی گئی۔ ملکی معیشت کی تیز رفتار ترقی اور بعد از گیارہ ستمبر (9/11) کی پیشرفت نے بھارت کی تزویریاتی افکار کی صورت حال کو تیزی سے تبدیل کر دیا۔ نئی دہلی نے بحریہ کو جدید بنانے پر زیادہ توجہ دی، جبکہ سمندروں کے حوالے سے تزویریاتی اور نظریاتی نمو اور ایک نیلے پانیوں کی بحریہ کی تشکیل کی خواہش نمایاں ہو گئی۔ بھارت کی بحریہ نے ساحلوں کے دفاع کے بارے میں اپنے کردار پر نظر ثانی کی اور کم از کم دستاویزات کی سطح تک بحری قوت کے پھیلاؤ کے سنے خاکے ترتیب دیئے۔ یہ مضمون بھارت کے بحری عزائم اور نظریاتی نمو میں ابھرتی ہوئی تبدیلی کا انڈو پیسفک کی نئی جغرافیائی ایجاد کے تناظر میں تجزیہ کرتا ہے۔ یہ اس امر کو زیر بحث لاتا ہے کہ اگرچہ فوجی طاقت بحری قوت کے پھیلاؤ کی موجب ہے بھارت کے بیان کردہ اہداف اور اس کی بحری قوت میں مماثلت نہیں ہے۔ گزشتہ چند سالوں میں پیش آنیوالے کئی بڑے حادثات اور پلوامہ کے بعد کی محاذ آرائی نے بھارتی بحریہ کے نظریاتی فلسفے اور اس کی جنگی صلاحیت میں فرق کی عملی طور پر توثیق کر دی۔

A Leaf from the Past

Two incidents, one just before and the other immediately after independence, shaped the future of the Indian Navy (IN) for years. First was a mutiny that broke out on a Royal Indian Navy ship based in Bombay in February 1946. It quickly spread to Karachi and Calcutta. Over fifty ships and many shore establishments were involved. The mutiny was planned by Indian sailors inspired by the trials of three Indian Army officials who had defected to the Japanese side. Consequently, any plans to advance the navy had to be halted, unless loyalty of its sailors could be ensured.¹ Later, due to the Kashmir war in October 1947, the Indian Air Force (IAF) was thrust into a vital role. Short of equipment, the IAF started receiving more attention than the IN.² As a result, the IN's role gradually became inconsequential.

In the years, the India-Pakistan encounters reinforced the fact that the IN was not 'ready' to participate in a war that originated 'somewhere deep inland'.³ In 1965, India's lone aircraft carrier and dominant part of its fleet remained blocked in Bombay harbour as Pakistan Navy (PN) pounded the coastal city of Dwarka on the country's western seaboard. And in 1971, despite overwhelming superiority in military forces, the Indian carrier was restricted to eastern peripheries in the Bay of Bengal until the sinking of the PN submarine Ghazi.⁴ The burden of history, a colonial legacy, and with major wars fought on land, India's strategic planning remained subordinate to land-centric territorial security.

This, however, was in stark contrast to the views expressed by K.M. Panikkar, "India's foremost geopolitical thinker."⁵ His famous treatise, *India and the Indian Ocean* published in 1945, linked global history and politics to the Indian Ocean. The author contended that the British supremacy in India and adjoining regions was only because the "Indian Ocean was a British Lake."⁶ In the words of Panikkar:

From fourth century BC until the discovery of sea route by the Portuguese, Hindu India was a sea power with colonies around the Indian Ocean. As long as India maintained her sea power, she was not conquered by any European power. India was invaded by land; but the invaders by land were absorbed by India, whereas those who invaded by sea remained alien. The struggles between the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British and the French for the mastery of trade in Asia were also for the control of the Indian Ocean. — For her own defence and for the peace of Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the Near East, India with her strategic position, economic resources and vast population should develop her naval power in order to maintain her supremacy in the Indian Ocean.⁷

Yet the good counsel of the sage that Panikkar was could not find much acceptance in the strategic culture of New Delhi.

Gandhi and Nehru Years

India's tardiness to invest in the navy had, however, much to do with the country's foreign policy under Gandhi and Nehru. According to one leading academic, it was the Indian national epic *Mahabharata* that inspired Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* or terminating violence non-violently.⁸ Gandhi's influence over Nehru ensured that *Satyagraha*, the chief determinant of Indian diplomacy of 'non-violence', shaped the nation's post-colonial diplomacy.⁹ However, this is not to suggest that Nehru had no big dreams for his nascent country. Far from that, he was prompt in affirming that "India [was] likely to dominate politically and economically the Indian Ocean region."¹⁰ This proclamation signified an Indian version of the *Monroe doctrine*.¹¹ But for lack of resources and reasons cited in the foregoing, investments in the IN could have been higher than what transpired. In the formative years, the IN was left to struggle for space in the

strategic community as well as apportionment in defence budget viz-á-viz its role.

The pacifism, however, saw a change in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. Improving armed forces became a top priority. The Indian government stipulated a growth of fifty-four principal warships¹² for the IN.¹³ PN's unchallenged ascendancy in the North Arabian Sea (NAS) during the 1965 war provided another rude awakening. In subsequent years, some rethinking on the wartime role of the navy apparently took place within the wider Indian strategic community. This is evident in the post-war inductions like the Russian Osa class missile boats, which demonstrated combat power in the NAS against Pakistan¹⁴ during the war of 1971.¹⁵ The capital-intensive ship of the IN, the aircraft carrier, nonetheless, could not play any meaningful role in providing what is called 'sea control'.

The war in 1971, the liberalisation of the Indian economy (1990 onwards), and resultant economic growth,¹⁶ besides the Kargil conflict of 1999, provided the real impetus. It triggered renewed interest in maritime military matters in India. With ever-increasing and expansively spread maritime interests in the Indian Ocean, including the all-important energy sea lines running to and from the Gulf and large diasporas overseas, the realisation for fielding a strong navy sank deeper in Indian national security psyche.

Historically, with procurements from Russia and gradually expanding indigenous warship construction industry, the 1970s witnessed a steady growth in Indian naval development. By the 1980s, the IN was in a relatively better position among littoral navies of the Indian Ocean. It had fairly improved its naval air and submarine potential.¹⁷ The rapid militarisation of the Indian Ocean and the presence of superior navies in the subsequent decades precipitated a shift in the IN's doctrinal focus from coastal defence to power projection.¹⁸ Although the goal was too ambitious to be met in the

short term, it underscored the IN's intent to play a notable role in defence of the "nation's maritime interests."¹⁹

A Conclusive Shift

The decisive shift came in the post-9/11 era. There was a sudden gush of maritime military (naval) forces in the Indian Ocean, particularly the western quadrant. These forces, mostly from extra-regional countries, were soon afterwards, joined by navies from regional littorals. In months and years that followed, the Indian Ocean witnessed the execution of maritime military operations like, "*Operation Enduring Freedom*" (October 2001), "*Operation Iraqi Freedom*" (March 2002), as well as "*Operation Atlanta*" (December 2008), the last meant to counter Somali piracy.²⁰

Shortly after the launch of *Operation Enduring Freedom* in October 2001, its maritime component, the Coalition Maritime Campaign Plan (CMCP) was launched by the US. In 2004, PN also joined CMCP. This resulted in filling up critical strategic space in the western Indian Ocean²¹ by Pakistan. This, otherwise, could have been taken up by the IN. Alongside such developments was China's perpetual and steep economic rise and Beijing's significant yet hushed investments in the PLA Navy. The mounting interest of China in the Indian Ocean along with its steady buildup of maritime military muscle in the Pacific Ocean was enough to unnerve not only New Delhi but the US as well.

The Fruits of Pivot

In 2012, the Obama administration declared a new US defence policy, commonly known as the 'Asia pivot' or 'rebalance'. With the shift in global politics and economic centre of gravity from "Euro-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific,"²² the US decided to relocate sixty per cent of its naval assets and marine forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific Command by 2020.²³ Defence cooperation with India was declared the

lynchpin in this pivot strategy.²⁴ This cooperation has since seen an astounding surge.

As the “thrust of ‘pivot’ (sic) has been on the maritime balance of power,” both the “Pacific and the Indian Oceans” have assumed significant attention in the latest US strategy.²⁵ A maritime cartographic construct, the Indo-Pacific,²⁶ is the new buzzword in global capitals. It is found on the pages of strategy documents of all major and regional powers, including *Australian Defence White Paper* (2013 and the latest 2016), *US Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power Revised* (CS21R), as well as the latest *Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (IMSS) (2015). The term is firmly reflected in the US National Security Strategy document²⁷ of 2017 as well.

Deciphering the Indo-Pacific

The geographical ‘spatial construct’ of the Indo-Pacific holds diverse meanings and nuances for different maritime powers. US, Australia, India, and China all view it differently. Two things are nonetheless settled. Indian and Pacific oceans have morphed into a single strategic component.²⁸ Developments in one will affect the other and vice versa, or so it is deemed. The term blends the established cartographic delimitations of the Indian Ocean with the geographic understanding of the Asia-Pacific region.²⁹ The maritime continuum links sea lines of communication from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.³⁰

In Australian understanding, the Indo-Pacific sphere is conceptualised as a global and collective strategic system that imposes political, economic, and security considerations across the region. A predominantly maritime environment, the Indo-Pacific arc is deemed to be a unified strategic system by virtue of the ceaseless presence of the sea.³¹ Indian mainstream viewpoint holds the Indo-Pacific as a useful way to balance China’s growing power and concurrently, as a blueprint to establish an “inclusive security architecture.”³² China, on the other hand, envisions the Indo-Pacific as

constituting two separate regions with their own respective features and functions, though both are increasingly important to Beijing.³³ The predominant Chinese thinking is that “the vast Indo-Pacific framework not only dilutes Beijing’s regional influence and puts maritime activities under singular focus but is driven by some countries’ desire to counterbalance China.”³⁴

Be that as it may, in the evolving international geopolitical discourse, the Indo-Pacific stands transformed into a strategic framework. The sea expanse is taken to extend from the west coast of the US to the western Indian Ocean along the east coast of Africa.³⁵ It is today the focus of principal global economic and military activity. The maritime continuum abundantly demonstrates cooperation as well as confrontation, the two going on side by side, at least for now.

Indo-Pacific is a region where the ‘core interests’ of Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the US, and others criss-cross. It renders the Indian Ocean strategically vital for the maintenance of an economic and military balance of power in the western Pacific.³⁶ Energy and trade shipments of several regional littorals and countries beyond endlessly travelling on the maritime highways of the Indian Ocean.³⁷ About 120,000 ships pass through the Indian Ocean annually and nearly 70,000 of these transit the Strait of Malacca³⁸ onwards to Pacific. According to 2017 statistics, “18.5 million barrels of oil transited the Strait of Hormuz” while 16 million barrels moved through the Malacca Strait on a daily basis.³⁹

Sea Power and the State

For a state, the “utilization of the sea for political purposes is an incentive for seeking prosperity and preservation of the integrity of the sovereign.”⁴⁰ This can certainly stem from such significant dilemmas as the dependence on functioning maritime trade and its protection. A state can execute its maritime might purposely to “consolidate power and seek to embellish” it on a majestic scale.⁴¹ “Sea power (two words) is understood as a functional application of power

at, from, above or across the sea. A seapower (one word) is a maritime-minded institution (a nation-state) with a given number of prerequisites to exercise sea power successfully toward larger objectives". In other words, "*seapower* is something that particular countries or *sea powers* have."⁴²

The Greek philosopher Thucydides (c.460-c.395BC) emphasised that "neither *sea power* nor *seapower* could be improvised, but had to be masterfully crafted and continuously developed to serve the varying needs of a state in different stages of peace, crisis, and war."⁴³ The "classic application"⁴⁴ of sea power is a military one. Hence the term has more military nuance than commercial or industrial.⁴⁵

Sea power: The Application

The use of military might is usually for either one, or a combination, of the following three political objectives: "deterrence, coercion, or defence." States employ military power against an adversary "to prevent that adversary from doing something (deter it), to force that adversary to change behaviour (coerce or compel it), or to protect itself against some harmful action that the adversary threatens or has taken (defend itself)."⁴⁶

Sea power has wide-ranging application in peace, crisis, and war. Exuded through naval platforms and other maritime military instruments, sea power is counted as a robust arm of foreign policy⁴⁷ (maritime diplomacy) as well as power projection.⁴⁸ Navies undertake power projection operations for a variety of reasons, i.e., to create a political, economic, or military effect ashore. They may also be designed to create a military effect at sea, through operations ashore.⁴⁹ Until the 1970s, the primary purpose of sea power was to achieve "command of the seas" or the all-embracing "control of relevant maritime areas" (including sea lines) in order to advance policy objectives. The term is anachronistic. It has since been replaced with

what is known as, "sea control," a more realistic and "achievable control" exercised in "limited areas" for limited periods of time.⁵⁰

Naval Forces Versus Ground and Air Forces

As an "instrument of diplomacy" and power projection, naval forces are distinct in three aspects as compared to ground and air arms of military forces. First, navies ensure 'flexibility' and 'poise', hence, they can be "sent to almost all" areas in the maritime domain; remain deployed, engaged, and then can be withdrawn quickly if required.⁵¹ Second, navies provide 'visibility'. Given their oceanic reach and presence, they can "readily convey threats, provide reassurance, or earn prestige in ways hard to duplicate by ground and air forces." Lastly, naval forces ensure 'universality'. For, the sea serves as an "international medium" which enables "naval vessels to reach distant countries independently of nearby bases."⁵²

Contextualising Strategic Culture

Strategic culture can be defined as, a "nation's distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of military force." It is said to be "developed gradually over time through unique historical processes."⁵³ The term was coined in 1977 by Jack Lewis Synder, a professor of International Relations at the Columbia University, US. Synder posited that strategic culture is, "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation, and which they share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy."⁵⁴ The inclusion of 'nuclear' factor was an integral part of Synder's definition. This is however disputed by other scholars.

According to Ken Booth, a British theorist, "a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment with respect to the threat or use of force make the strategic culture."⁵⁵

As a relatively new concept introduced in International Relations, strategic culture can be summed up as viewing of strategy, war, or national security through the “lens of culture.”⁵⁶ Some theorists also suggest it as “the cultural understanding of war.”⁵⁷

What Drives Indian Strategic Culture?

Nation-states seldom manage to fuse maritime and terrestrial components, developing a holistic view of their strategic geography. A maritime society tends to slight the terrestrial features of its geographic neighbourhood. Absent maritime consciousness,⁵⁸ conversely, a continental society’s mental map remains incomplete, in effect containing ‘blank’ areas in place of the seas.⁵⁹ Although it’s not entirely⁶⁰ clear⁶¹ to what extent, but India’s strategic culture is understood to be guided by the famous treatise *Arthashastra*, a comprehensive guide on statecraft. Besides subjects like law, agriculture, use of spies etc., the exposition deals extensively with diplomacy and war (including military tactics).⁶² Written in Sanskrit by Kautilya⁶³ (350-275BC), the chief advisor to Emperor Chandragupta, *Arthashastra* urges expansion of a king’s empire using punishing and ruthless measures. His well-recognised theory of inter-state relations, *Mandala*⁶⁴ seeks the enlargement of ‘empire’ by way of concentric rings or ‘circles’ comprising friends and foes with the central point being the King and his State.⁶⁵ Kautilya’s “empire” has however meant different things to different Indian minds.

Making Sense of Arthashastra and the Indian Ocean

According to *Arthashastra*, power is the ‘dominant reality’. It is ‘multidimensional’, and its ‘factors interdependent’. The purpose of strategy, according to the exposition, is to “conquer all other states and to overcome such equilibrium as existed on the road to victory.”⁶⁶ In Kautilya’s view, “contiguous polities existed in a state of latent hostility.” “Whatever professions of amity he might make, any ruler whose power grew significantly would eventually find that it was in his

interest to subvert his neighbour's realm,"⁶⁷ proclaims the theorist. Kautilya concludes "that the ruthless logic of competition allowed no deviation."⁶⁸ Kautilya is a political realist and gives the effect of being amoral.⁶⁹ This led Max Weber, an eminent 20th century political theorist, to conclude that "*Arthashastra* exemplified truly radical Machiavellianism—compared to it, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is harmless."⁷⁰ Regardless, if not earlier, with PM Modi from RSS⁷¹ now in the driving seat in New Delhi, strategic espousal of Kautilya's philosophy by India is no longer an illusion. Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Gandhi, on 30 January 1948, was a member of the RSS.⁷² But even if some doubt existed, the terror attack at Pulwama in Indian occupied Kashmir on 14 February 2019 and events in its wake patently settled the matter.

That said, it is far from clear whether and how the Kautilyan worldview applies to the oceans. Naval combat goes unmentioned in *Arthashastra*.⁷³ Yet K.M. Panikkar, who remains a fixture in Indian strategic discourses, quotes Kautilya on the extent of the 'empire'. "It should span the earth." Panikkar maintains that for Kautilya "the earth is the subcontinent, not the entire globe."⁷⁴ "Universal empire is confined to the Indian landmass, remaining within the frontiers set by the Indian Ocean and the northern mountain ranges."⁷⁵ "On what should happen beyond those frontiers, *Arthashastra* is silent."⁷⁶ Panikkar's writings nonetheless offer a useful benchmark for examining the "Indian maritime strategic culture."⁷⁷

Panikkar contends that the seaward frontiers of the subcontinent never presented an existential threat until the Portuguese seafarer Vasco da Gama anchored at Cochin in 1498. This, he says, "ushered in a clearly marked epoch of history in the Indian Ocean region."⁷⁸ It "may truly be said that India never lost her independence till she lost the command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century,"⁷⁹ holds Panikkar.

Rakesh Chopra, a retired admiral of the IN, advises Indian governments thus: "New Delhi should expand its gaze out to the fourth concentric Kautilyan ring," namely to "India's strategic frontiers that extend from the Suez Canal in the west to the South China Sea and beyond in the east."⁸⁰ Amongst the challenges before Indian governments, says Chopra, is to consummate the shift towards a more coercive blue water maritime strategy with the overall objective of creating an effective deterrence for defending India.⁸¹ Naval power, then, is part of any effort to extend India's defence perimeter.⁸²

Little wonder, the Indian strategic community increasingly deems the Indian Ocean to be "India's Ocean."⁸³ Such aspirations combine "several strands of Indian maritime strategic thinking."⁸⁴ Some strategists contend that "India must establish a defence perimeter in the Indian Ocean to preclude the possibility of extra-regional intervention; others draw a connection between India's maritime ambitions and its aspirations to become a great power."⁸⁵ Influential Indian strategists such as K. Subrahmanyam have argued that "leadership of the Indian Ocean" is an integral component of India's "manifest destiny."⁸⁶ All in all, extending maritime gaze concurrent with a projection of sea power, deep on either side of the country's seaboard, now seems an Indian obsession.

Maritime Doctrinal Growth

In 2004, the IN published its first apex document, "*Indian Maritime Doctrine*" (INBR 8) (IMD). An updated version was later released in 2009. The revised document was an extension of the previous edition with some subtle variations. The IMD mainly focused on "synergy" and "intelligence-sharing." It was launched in the wake of the Mumbai attacks.⁸⁷ The IN was then recently entrusted the responsibility for coastal security. In between the two editions of IMD, the IN also published a consort document in 2007 titled, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (IMMS).

The Indian maritime doctrine highlights fundamental principles, concepts, practices and procedures which govern the employment, development and modernisation of India's maritime military (naval) power. The focus is on the application of naval power across the conflict spectrum. The doctrine elucidates "the concepts, characteristics and context for employment of combat power at and from the sea."⁸⁸ As if attempting to convince readers (*public, government services and other Indian armed forces*), in its 'foreword', IMD states: "...India cannot be complacent about the emerging security environment and related security challenges, particularly in the IOR and in our extended neighbourhood"⁸⁹ (read western Pacific). "The Indian Navy has a key role to play in meeting the maritime component of these challenges, which have been increasing in both scale and scope in recent years,"⁹⁰ it adds.

IMD provides a handy sweep on "India's maritime interests including 7516 km long coastline, Island territories, seaborne trade, sea resources, and above all, the Persian Gulf and Africa centric energy supply resources."⁹¹ It underscores why India needs to control certain maritime chokepoints, vital islands and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, as well as in the Bay of Bengal.⁹² The document, furthermore, highlights the IN's vision of areas of legitimate interest. These include, "the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca."⁹³ Naval (maritime) diplomacy is labelled as the IN's primary peacetime task and the navy envisioned as "three-dimensional blue water naval force" able to counter distant maritime threats.⁹⁴

The 2007 IMMS, meanwhile, aims at "providing greater clarity and understanding on various facets of maritime military power."⁹⁵ A pioneering document, IMMS was purported to be read in conjunction with the IMD and the "*Joint Doctrine-Indian Armed Forces*"⁹⁶ to provide what it says, "a comprehensive understanding of (maritime) strategic thought process."⁹⁷ Three clear objectives are defined in the strategy document: "a design for relating ends to means, a significant tool in

maritime planning” and towards “preparation for conflict.”⁹⁸ In a first, it declares that the ends are obvious: “*deterrence (conventional and strategic)*” and “*should deterrence fail, war-fighting and conflict termination on terms favourable*” to India.⁹⁹ It goes on to define a “three-dimensional, versatile, blue-water Navy,” as clear means to achieve ends.¹⁰⁰ The second stated objective is to be a “foundation for planning and conduct of operations.”¹⁰¹ In the third objective, ‘preparation for conflict’, it cites peacetime operations, lessons learnt from exercises and wargames as crucial contributions towards deterrence and helpful in improving the “tenets of the strategy.”¹⁰²

Summing Up- IMD and IMMS

Together, the two publications articulate the IN’s strategic outlook and define parameters of employment and “evolution as combat force.”¹⁰³ IMMS essentially expounds the types of peacetime and wartime roles¹⁰⁴ expected of the IN.¹⁰⁵ IMD, on the other hand, alludes to missions and operational tasks that flow from these roles.¹⁰⁶ The 2007 IMMS, though providing a rationale for and insights to the IN’s modernisation,¹⁰⁷ focuses more on the state’s approach to moving from a current oceanic policy stance to a futuristic “aspired” position of a “blue water Navy.”¹⁰⁸ It is more on which the IN possibly set sights on than matter-of-fact status. The road to achieving the status of a blue water navy was and is still firmly far-off than what is generally perceived or projected. There are several reasons. These embrace technical, operational, weapon, and sensors-centric as well as foreign suppliers and platform-related issues. Factor in the questionable professional skills and the possibility of the IN achieving a blue water status in a short timeframe simply gets ruled out.

Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS)

The IN’s latest document, ‘*Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*’ was released in October 2015. The document comes in the wake of new developments and “aims to highlight India’s

contemporary maritime security considerations."¹⁰⁹ It is a follow-up edition of IMMS of 2007. The 'foreword' justifies the need for the revised document. "There seems little doubt that the 21st century will be the '*Century of the Seas*' (sic) for India and that the seas will remain a key enabler in her global resurgence," says Admiral R. K Dhowan, former Chief of the Naval Staff.¹¹⁰

Justification on the need for a review of preceding documents, (*IMD and IMMS*) is given as resting in "three significant developments" in the global and regional geostrategic environment.¹¹¹ The first spells more or less what is widely and internationally acknowledged, "shift in worldview from *Euro-Atlantic* to *Indo-Pacific*" triggering, in the words of the new document, "significant political, economic and social changes" in Indian Ocean region. The second it says is "a considerable change in India's security-cum threat calculus."¹¹² Lastly, it is the "national outlook towards the seas and the maritime domain, and a clearer recognition of maritime security being a vital element of national progress and international engagement."¹¹³

There could not have been a better explanation of the navy's relevance for India and its final adoption in the country's strategic culture. The document is spread in eight chapters and is preceded by 'Vision' and 'Guiding Principles'. Two key aspects are recognised as the driving source behind the 'revised strategy', "the rise in sources, types and intensity of threats" and "India's national interests" that demand the "seas to remain secure."¹¹⁴ Besides coastal areas, maritime zones of the country, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea are identified as "Primary Areas of Interest."¹¹⁵ The Persian Gulf is listed as the source of the majority of the country's oil supplies. The document covers 'sea routes to the Pacific Ocean, South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean and other regions including the west coast of Africa as "Secondary Areas of Interest."¹¹⁶ The threat of maritime terrorism (in non-traditional dimension)¹¹⁷ seems to weigh heavily on Indian Naval minds and appears at several places including

“Foreword.” The section entitled “Traditional Threats and Sources” is less than convincing.¹¹⁸

Interestingly, the document also confers upon the IN the title of a “net security provider” in the maritime neighbourhood.¹¹⁹ What precisely is the extent of this “maritime neighbourhood” is not clear. But the encouragement to assume this mantle comes from two sources cited in the ‘notes’ section of the document. The first is a 2011 address by the then Indian Defence Minister, A. K. Antony and the second, a May 2013 statement PM Manmohan Singh.¹²⁰ “The Indian Navy may be mandated to be a net security provider to Island nations in the IOR,” says the first. The next goes further. It places India as, “well positioned to become a net provider of security in the immediate region and beyond.”¹²¹ Whether such a claim holds ground in the current geopolitical environment with conflicting interests of other powerful stakeholders in the Indian Ocean remains to be seen. And this is not to mention the present accident-plagued¹²² state¹²³ of the IN and questionable claims of its operational readiness.¹²⁴ But in this self-conferred title, a major shift in thinking is as evident as a yearning for unqualified dominance in Indian if not Indo-Pacific.

Where it stands

An Indian naval plan paper publicised in 1948, proclaimed a ten-year strategic plan to develop a sixty-nine ship navy, structured around a “balanced fleet of two light aircraft carriers, three cruisers and twelve destroyers.”¹²⁵ No plan to induct submarines was however in the pipeline. The most important investment by the IN was the development of its “in-house capacity for ship design and construction.”¹²⁶ Twenty-five years after independence, the IN commissioned the indigenously built “INS *Nilgiri*, a modification of the British *Leander* class.”¹²⁷

According to *The World Defence Almanac, 2018*, the IN has some 55,000 personnel inclusive of 5,900 Naval Air and 1,000 Marines. It has, moreover, some 40,000 civil employees and 15,300 strong Coast

Guard. With Headquarters in New Delhi, the IN has three Naval Commands, i.e., Western (HQ Mumbai), Southern (HQ Kochi) and Eastern (HQ Visakhapatnam). The Far Eastern Command (also known as Andaman and Nicobar Command) in Port Blair is a “unified inter-service” command.¹²⁸

the IN constitutes about ‘4.3 per cent’ of the Indian military forces. Its budget increased “more than two-fold over the last decade from 161 billion to INR 405 billion,” with its annual growth rate hovering “around 15-18 per cent.”¹²⁹ As compared to the 1990s and pre-1990s decades, the IN figures much more “prominently in geostrategic planning of India.” It used to be the eighth largest but has since grown to become the fifth largest world Navy.¹³⁰ Since 1991, the navy furthermore focused on modernisation rather than adding ships.¹³¹ More recently, the IN’s first locally constructed nuclear submarine *Arihant* completed its first deterrent patrol.¹³²

Courtesy the US, the IN has added some powerful cutting edge platforms in its inventory.¹³³ In operational context too, the US Navy has been a real source of expanding the IN’s interoperability and maritime operations skills. This came by way of regular conduct of bilateral and other large-scale exercises involving what is called the “quad of the great maritime democracies.”¹³⁴ Major combatants like aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines¹³⁵ frequently participate in these manoeuvres.

There are 140 warships and 220 aircraft in the IN’s current inventory while “32 ships and submarines” are under construction in various local shipyards.¹³⁶ Recently, New Delhi also approved the construction of another “56 warships and six submarines” as part of its ten-year plan.¹³⁷ The IN is working on a plan to have a 200-ship fleet by 2027.¹³⁸ The 2012-27 Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (MCP) is committed to *fielding* three carrier battle groups (CBGs), “one for each sea board, with a third in reserve, to fulfil India’s maritime power projection aspirations.”¹³⁹ According to IMD, “CBGs comprise the most

substantial instruments for projecting hard power, as they possess “ordnance delivery capability of a high order” capable of prevailing over the enemy’s operational “centre of gravity by degrading his decisive points.”¹⁴⁰

The Unresolved Debate: Sea Control or Sea denial?

The IN’s doctrinal thought process aims at enforcing sea control. As a powerful instrument of power projection, aircraft carriers are accordingly at the core of such a thought process. The IN currently fields a single 46,000 tonne refurbished Kiev-class carrier, INS *Vikramaditya*. The carrier was formally operationalised in May 2014 after long delays and exorbitant cost overruns. The carrier can carry up to twenty-four MiG 29 K attack fighters in addition to ASW and AEW helicopters.¹⁴¹ Another under-construction 37,500-tonne carrier, *Vikrant* is likely to join the IN fleet by 2021.¹⁴² It will have the capacity to carry around thirty MiG-29 Ks and ASW and AEW helicopters. The third carrier is meanwhile still battling to be lifted from the design stage.¹⁴³ Interestingly, however, in the construction of new carriers, not only is the IN struggling against financial constraints and delays by the Ministry of Defence but also faces a quiet opposition from within its own rank and file.¹⁴⁴ A cross-section of the IN officers holds a belief in pursuing a sea denial¹⁴⁵ strategy¹⁴⁶ by deploying submarines and surface combatants instead of seeking sea control via costly and asset-intensive CBGs.¹⁴⁷ Add to this the stiff opposition by IAF to the IN’s future aircraft carrier plans. The IAF argues that India’s Island territories off its east coast epitomise an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” one it aims to operationalise.¹⁴⁸ The debate on whether to exercise sea control or else go for sea denial has seemingly reached a dead end.

Pulwama: Exposing the Chasm

Given the aforementioned context, does the present force configuration of the IN translate into a maritime combat power suitable enough to achieve ‘sea control’ in say, NAS, the primary area

of interest¹⁴⁹ of PN? The February 2019 suicide attack in Pulwama¹⁵⁰ in the India-Occupied Kashmir and events unfolding in its wake provide partial answers.

On 28 February, in a joint press briefing by the Indian military forces, the IN spokesperson had this to say, "The IN is deployed in a high state of readiness and remains poised in all three dimensions, on surface, undersea, and in air to deter, prevent and defeat any misadventure by Pakistan in the maritime domain." He went on to add, "I can assure you of a resolute, swift and strong response by the Navy when needed."¹⁵¹

During the third week of March 2019, reports quoting the IN surfaced in media. These suggested that India sent nuclear submarines and an aircraft carrier battle group along with dozens of other navy ships to the NAS after a suicide bomber earlier struck in the disputed Kashmir in February.¹⁵² One cannot deny or confirm the veracity of these reports coming weeks after the intense stand-off. But despite being numerically superior to PN in significant ways and a 'self-proclaimed' net security provider in the Indian Ocean, nothing notable was done by the IN in NAS. The IN carrier was nowhere close to Pakistan's coast to showcase any military intent or political-cum-strategic messaging. There was neither any harassment nor coercion of Pakistan's flag carriers,¹⁵³ presumably moving on maritime highways in the western Indian Ocean. It was business as usual. So what was the 'poise'¹⁵⁴ for, if at all it was one in the first place, as stated by the IN spokesperson? The argument that perhaps India did not want to escalate is not plausible either since New Delhi was the one that upped the ante in the first place. If it was not anticipating such a reaction from Pakistan, could, however, be another story.

PN's Riposte

Contrary to the above, on the night of 4 March 2019, an Indian *Scorpene* class submarine, INS *Kalvari* was detected and localised by PN. With its induction mast up, the submarine was found operating

roughly 86 nautical miles from Gwadar.¹⁵⁵ It was apparently deployed close to Pakistan's coast to strike targets on land possibly at Gwadar, Pasni, or Ormara.

Kalvari is the latest addition to the IN fleet. The first of the six French *Scorpene* submarines ordered by the IN, *Kalvari* was commissioned by PM Narendra Modi in December 2017. The attack submarine carries stealth as well as advanced acoustic silence (noise reduction) features. It can undertake anti-surface, anti-submarine, intelligence gathering as well as mine-laying missions. The submarine is armed with precision-guided weapons, including torpedoes and Exocet missiles.

Pulwama's aftermath was the first time that Pakistan practically executed its evolving strategic doctrinal posture of 'offensive defence' revised from a pure "defensive concept following Kargil conflict."¹⁵⁶ The detection of *Kalvari* raises more questions than it answers. If it was snorkelling (to recharge batteries) on purpose so close to Pakistan's coast during such a militarily charged climate, it only goes to demonstrate the professional incompetence and naiveté of the crew onboard. And if it was on account of some technical glitch occurring in a virtual combat environment, the basic premise of procuring such modern machines becomes questionable. To be fair, however, PN ostensibly used some improvised techniques to keep the area under its watchful eyes. *Kalvari* was perhaps caught off-guard. In any event, once detected, the Indian submarine was easy prey. It could have been easily destroyed by P3C of PN dropping depth charges or torpedoes. But for the state policy of 'exercising restraint'¹⁵⁷ *Kalvari* may have been consigned to the Davy Jones Locker.

Aircraft Carrier: Asset or Liability

Ben Ho, a senior analyst at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, expounds on the state of the IN. In a compelling essay published in the US Naval War College Review of Winter 2018, Ho postulates a full-scale war between Pakistan and India

in the NAS in a time horizon of 2025. After closely examining IMSS, Ho rules out any meaningful role of the IN carriers in achieving 'sea control' against Pakistan in a conflict.

Both INS *Vikramaditya* and the future carrier INS *Vikrant* are classified as "small deck carriers by virtue of their size and aircraft complement." During operations, "each carrier and its several destroyer and frigate consorts constitute CBG and one or two such entities make up a carrier task force (CTF)."¹⁵⁸ Although IMSS devotes an "entire chapter to war-fighting," it barely suggests that carriers are to "wrest sea control from the adversary."¹⁵⁹ The role of carriers during conflict¹⁶⁰ is anything but discernable.

Ho examines several naval combat aspects on both sides. These include aircraft complement onboard the IN carrier viz-à-viz offensive and defensive tasks anticipated in a war with Pakistan. In the case of Pakistan, PN's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) edifice in NAS, the submarine potential which author terms as 'ominous', as well as combat radius of Mirage and JF-17 fighters armed with 180-250 km ASCM is taken into account. He then persuasively rules out the possibility of the Indian carrier (CBG) achieving sea control by enforcing "blockade of major Pakistani maritime nodes"¹⁶¹ and interdicting its seaborne commerce. The author also discards any 'offensive role' of Indian carriers during a high-intensity conflict with Pakistan. It is maintained that the Indian sea control in the NAS will be "contingent on weakening of the enemy's (Pakistan's) A2/AD edifice."¹⁶²

The author has a piece of profitable advice for the IN: "It may be time for New Delhi to rethink the centrality of the 'queen of the waves' in its naval planning."¹⁶³ Similar views were recently expressed by another analyst who questioned: "whether India strictly needs carriers at all if it cannot use them during the decisive periods of a conflict."¹⁶⁴ "The ability of a minor naval power to deny passage to a far superior enemy through adoption of an asymmetric anti-access

strategy is something that continues to worry navies today,"¹⁶⁵ says Ian Speller, an accomplished military scholar. Is there a lesson for the IN?

Concluding thoughts

The Indian strategic culture has undergone a wholesale change since the end of the Cold War. The importance of the IN as a powerful instrument of diplomacy, projecting power beyond the country's immediate shores and to safeguard extensive maritime strategic interests also appears to have dawned to the army which historically played the role of 'big brother' in defence and security matters.

To its credit, the Indian naval leadership's role in making the IN relevant in the strategic and security calculus of New Delhi cannot be overstated. This is reflected in various policy and doctrinal documents placed in the public domain at periodic intervals. *The Strategic Defence Review: The Maritime Dimension - A Naval Vision* (May 1998), *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (April 2004), the IN's *Vision Statement* (May 2006), *Roadmap to Transformation* (October 2006), *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (IMMS)* (September 2007) and *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009* not to mention *IMSS* (2015), all published over time illustrate the efforts of the IN to earn itself appropriate recognition. The latest in the series is the *Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF-2017)* which provides foundations for greater integration and interdependence "to achieve higher inter-operability and compatibility within the Armed Forces."¹⁶⁶ Perhaps even more significant development is the Indian armed forces' move away from 'single service' to 'joint services' structure and setting up of tri-services Command at the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁶⁷

From India's Indian Ocean perspective, these developments unequivocally point to some explicit and tacit aspirations. Two are significant. The first is to have the Indian Ocean solely for India sans any external power interference or foreign presence in the region, more commonly, India's Monroe Doctrine.¹⁶⁸ The other clearer dream

is to develop a blue water navy in a short time frame (say by 2030). Such a navy will be carrier-centric, duly supported by an adequate number of *Arihant* class SSBNs. The goal here seems to be able to exercise independent (without the crutches of US) sea control between Hormuz to Malacca. In the medium to long term, once local maritime military-industrial and technological base is sufficiently developed, this area of influence may expand to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in the west and western Pacific in the east and beyond. The question that, however, begs an answer is this: *if the carrier cannot be put to any offensive use in a crisis with Pakistan like post-Pulwama, let alone full-blown conflict in which it must establish sea control, how does the IN expect to dominate in foreseeable future against its upcoming rival, PLA Navy?*

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- ¹⁴⁵ Aims to “deny the enemy the ability or freedom to use a specified area of sea for his own purposes and for a specific period of time”. It differs from sea control in the sense that the force denying a sea area to the enemy does not have freedom to use that particular area itself.
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- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid.
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- ¹⁵⁴ “An attribute of a maritime force which permits it to remain in international waters for sustained period while retaining the ability to become engaged in events ashore or withdrawn without risk of embroilment.” *Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan: Preserving Freedom of Seas*, 20. Also, ¹⁵⁴ “Glossary,” 284.
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- ¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77–78.
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