BEYOND DETERRENCE: INDIA'S NAVAL MODERNISATION INSTIGATING MARITIME ARMS RACE SPIRAL MODEL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the evolution of India's maritime strategy and its operationalisation through sustained naval modernisation, specifically examining how the integration of advanced strategic assets influences the security architecture of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Arabian Sea. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study triangulates data from scholarly literature, official policy documents, and real-time reportage – including the mobilisation of India's Western Naval Fleet during the May 2025 military standoff – to analyse shifting threat perceptions in the maritime domain. The research argues that India's assertive maritime progression catalyzes regional destabilisation, undermining the fragile security matrix and precipitating an intense naval arms race between India and Pakistan. By evaluating Indian strategic developments alongside Pakistan's subsequent countermeasures, the paper explores the resulting degradation of deterrence dynamics between these two Nuclear Weapon States (NWSs). The study provides a descriptive mapping of military build-ups and an exploratory assessment of the strategic options available to Pakistan to maintain a regional maritime balance. Ultimately, the analysis highlights how such power projections heighten the risk of entanglement and challenge the long-term stability of the broader Indian Ocean maritime environment.

KEYWORDS: IOR, Security Dilemma, Maritime Strategy, Naval Modernisation, Strategic Stability.

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INTRODUCTION

The recent military escalation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 highlighted a renewed focus on the naval domain. This shift was reflected in the deployment of India's Western Fleet into the Northern Arabian Sea, bringing Indian naval forces into closer proximity to Pakistan's major maritime and economic hub, Karachi. This threatening development prompted the mobilisation of Pakistan's naval fleet (Arab News Pakistan, 2025). The actions in the maritime domain in May 2025 were not impulsive; rather, the years-long naval fleet modernisation and advancement prompted India to undertake any misadventure in the high seas. The Indian Navy is large and technologically advanced, with two Carrier Battle Groups (CBGs): INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant.

Additionally, on the strategic front, India operates three Nuclear-Powered Submarines (SSBNs): INS Arighat, INS Arihant and most recently commissioned INS Aridhaman. These strategic hardware systems give India an upper hand in the naval realm vis-à-vis Pakistan. In this respect, India received phenomenal US logistical and technical assistance for the strategic force build-up in both conventional and strategic domains. India signed three significant agreements with the US in four years: The Logistical Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, the Communication, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020 (Gul, 2025). These agreements proved to be critical developments, as they provided India with unlimited assistance for naval force modernisation. As a result, this provided India with a route to becoming a formidable maritime force in the IOR.

This paper argues that these developments will deepen the security dilemma in the maritime domain, given the region's fragile security matrix between India and Pakistan. The conceptual framework will provide the fundamental understanding regarding the concept of the security dilemma and link it with the assertive developments in the maritime build-up. The paper further discusses India's strategic naval capabilities, with a special focus on the CBGs and SSBNs. Such strategically destabilising developments increase threat perception in the high seas, prompting Pakistan to take effective and timely countermeasures. The central hypothesis of the paper theorizes that Indian naval modernisation acts as a primary catalyst for regional destabilisation, specifically degrading the deterrence dynamics

between India and Pakistan. By shifting the maritime balance of power, these offensive developments switch the IOR from a state of fragile restraint to an environment defined by heightened insecurity, directly compromising the strategic equilibrium and forcing a reactive posture from neighbouring states.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology centred on an exploratory case study of the IOR. Data is gathered through a systematic review of primary and secondary sources, including official naval doctrines, policy documents, and reputable digital news archives. The research utilizes qualitative content analysis to identify key themes such as naval offensive capabilities and deterrence dynamics. By triangulating data from diverse sources, the study provides a comprehensive descriptive analysis of how Indian naval modernisation serves as an independent variable impacting the strategic stability of the region.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

After revisiting the thoughts of Herbert Butterfield, John Herz, and Robert Jervis, Professor Shiping Tang examines the definition of the security dilemma. Tang proposes conditions necessary for the existence of an actual security dilemma: it exists only between two defensive realist states, involves uncertainty about each other's intentions, and involves states without malign intentions. Otherwise, a true security dilemma cannot exist, according to the scholars' definitions above. If one state is already malign in its intentions, the Spiral model applies (Tang 2009). Robert Jervis views the global system as a natural state of competition that operates without central authority, and states always seek security to survive in it.

From Jervis's perspective, the possibility of conflict arises from greedy states that seek more security than is necessary in an anarchic system, driven by malign intentions. While in the spiral model, the possibility of conflict occurs when a state increases its security measures fundamentally for security purposes, and it decreases the security of the other states (Glaser 1997). India's naval build-up is a fundamental reason for disturbing strategic balance and increasing military asymmetry, posing a major threat to the security of IOR. Mahanian ideas are deeply reflected in India's maritime aspirations and strategic measures. According to Mahan, "The seaboard of a country is one of its frontiers; and the easier the access offered

by the frontier to the region beyond, in this case the sea, the greater will be the tendency of a people toward intercourse with the rest of the world by it. If a country is imagined having a long seaboard, but entirely without a harbour, such a country can have no sea trade of its own, no shipping, no navy" (Mahan, 2017). Controlling oceans, sea routes, and choke points ensures the freedom of trade and also extends the mobility of the naval forces in the high seas. K.M. Panikker, the former ambassador to China, was a proponent of classical geopolitics. He advocated using India's 7500km coastline for power projection in the region through naval expansion. He also emphasized the need to implement security measures in the IOR to avoid repeating India's colonial past and its total dominance in the IOR. But Jawaharlal Nehru leaned more towards the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) than towards any strategic alignment during the Cold War (Sen and Majumdar, 2024).

If the rationale of colonial experiences is considered as a primary determinant relating to Indian naval build-ups to safeguard its sovereignty and the IOR against external forces, yet the uncertainty regarding strategic intentions, whether India is malign towards others or not, still creates a dilemma. Historically, Indian maritime doctrine has evolved into three stages. The first doctrine, from 2004 to 2007, emphasized India's role as a security provider for free trade, communication, and the protection of national interests in the IOR. At the next junction from 2009 to 2015, the term "doctrine" was replaced with "strategy", and the scope was extended into maritime expansion, claiming high-sea territories in the IOR. In the third juncture, from 2015 to date, the Indian maritime strategy leaned more on the aggressive posturing by stressing total control over the IOR through strong naval forces and area denial to any third party.

The Quad, MALABAR naval exercises, Nuclear-powered Attack Submarines (SSNs), Nuclear-powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs) for second strike capability, and Aircraft carriers are part of this recent evolution. This evolution is characterized by numerous ambiguities stemming from India's ongoing expansion in the IOR through territorial claims (See Mahendru & Wani, 2026, p. 266-281). Within the framework of Mahan-Panikker's joint emphasis on India's naval build-ups, it offers very little justification for these developments as defensive posturing rather than offensive developments as a pursuit of a hegemonic role to amplify its geopolitical standing in the region (Sen and Majumdar, 2024). States may adopt defensive measures that inadvertently trigger a genuine security

dilemma even if they initially lack malign intent. But intentions are not fixed; they are evolutionary, because states are like living organisms, they evolve with the passage of time according to the geostrategic and geopolitical dynamics. Where the transition from the security dilemma to the spiral model occurs, leading states into a vicious cycle of aggression against others under uncertain circumstances (Zagare & Kigour, 1998). Consequently, as the study characterizes India's naval expansion as an assertive trajectory toward regional hegemony, the Spiral Model emerges as the most rigorous analytical framework for evaluating the resultant regional destabilization.

INDIA'S NAVAL BUILDUP: SCOPE AND INTENT

The historical account of the Indian naval buildup dates back to the colonial period. The post-partition period, beginning in 1947, serves as the empirical baseline for this evolution. At the time of the partition, India inherited some 33 outdated vessels and around 11000 personnel from the departing British Royal Navy (Early History, 2025). However, India's naval development and modernisation were a gradual process and took time to be established in line with Indian objectives. In 1965, India and Pakistan faced each other. However, the engagement was mainly concentrated on the disputed regions in Sindh and Kashmir. The attack on the coastal city of Dwarka in India by the Pakistan Navy prompted a shift in the Indian decision-makers to rethink the country's maritime defence policy (Hiranandani, 2000).

In 1968, India found a new partner – the former USSR - as an expanding power to corroborate them in the naval domain, and their collaboration began on the high seas (Hiranandani, 2000). This era established the foundational logic of Indian sea power: the integration of foreign technology to achieve regional dominance. The tremors of that corroboration and collaboration were felt during the Pak-Indo war of 1971, when USSR provided India with the naval backing to hinder Pakistan from reaching the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). As a result, Pakistan's forces in the tumultuous Eastern wing were blockaded, leading to the depletion of their logistical resources, which eventually proved consequential in the breakup of the Eastern wing of Pakistan. Technologically, India employed INS Kursura, a diesel-electric submarine, and INS Vikrant, an aircraft carrier; both were built with the USSR's technical and technological support. Within the strategic paradigm, both naval platforms played a significant role, giving India the upper hand in the maritime domain vis-à-vis Pakistan, which was struggling after the partition

in the formative phase of its history (Kesnur, Doraibabu, & Kale, 2022). After 1971, the so-called victory in tearing apart the Eastern wing of Pakistan, the Indian Navy took a different approach in the region by asserting its influence over smaller coastal states such as the Maldives and Seychelles, signaling the nascent stages of an India-centric Monroe Doctrine (Brewster, 2014). However, the significant boost came in India's naval outlook in the 21st century, when it began maritime operations in the IOR to secure so-called sea trade routes. The Indian Navy was also part of the Parakaram Exercises that took place during the 2001-02 military standoff with Pakistan following the Indian parliament attack in 2001 (Bharat Rakshak, 2003).

The 2001 US intervention in Asia against Al-Qaeda fundamentally recalibrated the global security paradigm from traditional inter-state conflict to concentrated counter-terrorism operations against non-state actors employing asymmetrical warfare. To sustain the strategic reach and logistical burden of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, the US required coalition support and maritime domain assistance from regional partners. In the 21st century, this progression accelerated into a "Spiral Model" of security, driven by India's strategic entanglement with the United States. In 2006, India and the US signed an agreement demonstrably for providing smooth maritime passage from the Malacca Strait to the US logistics for Global War on Terror (WoT) efforts in Afghanistan (MEA, 2006). This assistance in 2006 was for bolstering the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), thereby solidifying the nascent phase of Indo-US naval cooperation.

Additionally, China's rise on the global stage further threatened the US, prompting it to seek a regional partner to counter China's rise. India, long in a hostile relationship with China over the disputed Himalayan territories, became the natural choice for the US to partner with in the region. In 2005, the US and India discussed a civil nuclear deal that was later approved and finalized in 2008, marking the beginning of a significant strategic entanglement in the 21st century between the global and a potential evolving regional power (Bajoria & Pan, 2010). The US-India strategic defence partnership has played a significant role in strengthening the Indian Navy's operational capabilities. This helped India gain access to modern, state-of-the-art technology and assisted the Indian Navy in increasing interoperability through the Malabar exercises. India became the strategic

hub for the US naval maintenance in the region. In exchange, India gets access to the US naval advanced technologies after signing LEMAO in 2016 (Baig & Alyan, 2022). In 2018, they signed another agreement named COMCASA, which provided India with secure lines of communication with US and allied nations during a hostile scenario (Baig & Alyan, 2022). Taking this bilateral setting one step further into the outer space domain with BECA in 2020, which will help India access US geospatial satellites. The BECA is considered vital in improving the accuracy of Indian missiles, navigation systems, and targeting, enhancing the effectiveness of its maritime patrol aircraft and warships (Baig & Alyan, 2022). These strategic agreements became the platforms for Indian naval modernization in the 21st century, shifting India's naval warfighting prowess in the IOR.

In the current strategic naval outlook, India possesses two Carrier Battle Group formations (aircraft carriers):

1. INS Vikramaditya (R33), which was commissioned in 2013 and operationalised in 2014. The R33 was built in collaboration with Russia. The carrier is a modified Kiev-class vessel with a deployment capacity of over 30 aerial vehicles, including 26 fixed-wing fighter jets and around 10 helicopters. It can carry 16,000 personnel on board to operate it ("INS Vikramaditya," 2021).
2. The INS Vikrant (IAC-I) aircraft carrier is strategically a significant leap because it is built indigenously by India. It was commissioned in 2022, and operationalization was finalized in 2023, with the entry into force. The deployment capacity of INS Vikrant is the same as that of INS Vikramaditya and can carry more than 30 aerial vehicles, including 16,000 personnel (PIB, 2025).

India's deployment of two Carrier Battle Groups (INS Vikramaditya and the indigenous INS Vikrant) grants it a dual-seaboard offensive presence. More critically, the operationalization of SSBNs like the INS Arihant, Arighaat and Aridhaman represents a shift from traditional deterrence toward a "counterforce" framework. Both aircraft carriers can carry Russian-made all-weather Mikoyan MiG-29K multirole fighters, and the air wings include Kamov Ka-31 for Airborne Early Warning & Control and Kamov Ka-28 for anti-submarine warfare, as well as the Indian-made Advanced Light Helicopter (Dhruv) (CASS India, 2025). In the strategic realm, the deployment of the two aircraft carriers gave India a dual-seaboard presence, both in the western (Arabian Sea) and eastern (Bay of

Bengal) seas. In addition, another strategic development that could destabilize the maritime security equilibrium is the operationalization of nuclear-powered submarines. Currently, India possesses three operational SSBNs: INS Arihant, INS Arighaat and INS Aridhaman. Nuclear-powered submarines play a crucial role in ensuring the assured second-strike capability because SSBNs can remain submerged undetected for months. This feature of SSBNs ensures their survivability during a nuclear exchange on land. A nuclear reactor inside the submarines provides power, speed, and unlimited operational range. With respect to the armament deployment, all these SSBNs carry short- and long-range SLBMs; K-15 Sagarika (short range) that have a range of 750 km and K-4 (long range) with a range of 3500 km (Nuclear Threat Initiative [NTI], 2025) (Singsit, 2026).

Ultimately, the shift from No First Use (NFU) to a more assertive First Use (FU) posture represents a fundamental realignment of India's strategic logic, where technological determinism, manifested through SSBNs, canisterized missiles, and MIRV capabilities, supersedes traditional defensive restraint. It must be noted, however, that India's official nuclear doctrine remains 'No First Use' (NFU). The shift toward a counterforce posture described here is a perceived operational evolution based on technological acquisitions (SSBNs, MIRV, canisterized missiles), not an announced policy change. This gap between official doctrine and actual capability generates strategic ambiguity, which itself fuels Pakistani threat perceptions.

By transitioning from a counter-value strategy of punitive retaliation to a counterforce framework aimed at pre-emptive decapitation, India is effectively shortening the nuclear fuse within a compressed geographical theatre. This development creates an acute "use it or lose it" dilemma and heightens crisis instability, as the entanglement of conventional and nuclear assets leaves little room for rational decision-making during a conflict. Consequently, the disconnect between India's official doctrine and its evolving operational capabilities creates a dangerous vacuum of strategic ambiguity, wherein the pursuit of absolute security through pre-emption paradoxically increases the risk of inadvertent escalation and existential catastrophe for the entire region.

PAKISTAN'S COUNTERMEASURES

In direct response to India's assertive trajectory, Pakistan's countermeasures illustrate a defensive "action-reaction" cycle consistent with the Spiral Model. The Pakistan Navy was formed right after the partition of the

subcontinent and inherited the naval fleet from the exiting Royal British Navy (Cheema, 2002). The country's strategic buildup began with the procurement of its first submarine, PNS Ghazi (USS Diablo), from the US. After acquiring PNS Ghazi, Pakistan established the Naval Submarine Force in 1964. Following its induction into the naval fleet, the submarine force took part in the contentious engagements of the 1965 Indo-Pak war (Pakistani Navy, 2025). However, from 1970 to 1980, Pakistan commissioned a total of five diesel-electric submarines: three Daphne-class and later two Agosta-class submarines from France. Daphne class includes PNS Hangor, PNS Shushuk, and PNS Mangro, while Agosta class includes PNS Hashmat and PNS Hurmat (Web Desk, 2020).

Though those submarines were diesel-powered, they became the decisive deterrent in the 1971 Indo-Pak war, where PNS Hangor sank the Indian Navy's frigate INS Khurki and defended the maritime borders of Pakistan. While the submarine's striking capability was enhanced with the acquisition of the Harpoon anti-ship missile in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the Pakistan Navy inducted a modernized version of the Agosta 90B class submarines into its submarine fleet. Agosta 90, indigenously known as PNS Khalid, works on the Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology, enabling it to remain stealth underwater for a longer period than previous submarines (Pakistan Navy, 2025). After the breakup of the USSR, the world became unipolar, and alliances and relations among states were significantly reshaped. Similarly, Pakistan's naval cooperation and collaboration with France came to a halt.

However, with the start of the 21st century, the world witnessed a significant change in the power dynamic. The US signed a strategic nuclear and defence pact with India to contain China's rise on the global stage. This strategic development enhanced Indian warfighting capabilities not only on land but also in the maritime domain (discussed above). This strategic cooperation expanded India's maritime access by allowing it to use designated US ports and military bases for refueling, maintenance, and resupplying naval resources worldwide. Hence, it enhanced the operational reach of the Indian Navy beyond the Indian Ocean. This strategically significant Indo-US agreement proved to be a destabilizing catalyst for maritime security, prompting regional actors to collaborate in the defence realm, particularly in the high seas, to counter the growing Indo-US partnership beyond regional spheres. Pak-China cooperation is concentrated across three key domains: (i) Technology Transfer and Platform Acquisition, (ii) Joint

Training and Interoperability, (iii) Strategic Logistics and Maritime Security (Government of China & Government of Pakistan, 2025).

As Pakistan's largest arms supplier, China has played a crucial role in modernizing the Pakistan Navy. Pakistan is acquiring eight Hangor-class conventional submarines based on AIP technology, which ensures stable, longer underwater endurance. These submarines are potent for Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) against the Indian CBG. Moreover, China delivered four Type 054A/P Multi-Role guided-missile frigates equipped with modern radar systems, electronic warfare suites, and advanced anti-air and anti-surface weaponry (such as the CM-302 anti-ship missile). This transfer of technology helped Pakistan modernize its Surface Fleet (Ibrahim, 2023). Pakistan and China are also actively engaged in joint training and interoperability exercises at sea to enhance operational synergy. The flagship 'Sea Guardian' exercises take place regularly between them in the Arabian Sea and off the coast of China. The key highlight of the drill, among other outputs, is the joint Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) effort. On the other hand, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) also regularly participates in Pakistan's AMAN naval exercise in the Arabian Sea.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC STABILITY

The Monroe Doctrine defined the US area of interest in the Western Hemisphere. The sole hegemony over the entire American continent allowed it to explore, mobilize, and exert total control by limiting European influence in its backyard. The doctrine became an important set of principles in US foreign policy, which later shaped US strategic goals through the US Grand Strategy over the next two centuries. Some of the distinguishing factors that helped the US implement and achieve the strategic goals of the Monroe Doctrine were extending cooperation with neighbours and providing a security guarantee against European influence in the post-colonial era. On the other hand, the perceived Indian-style Monroe Doctrine reflects irreconcilable views of the South Asian region vis-à-vis the US Doctrine (Homes, 2008).

The US Monroe Doctrine represented a strategic response to European colonial influence in the Western Hemisphere. The primary objective of the US was to exclude colonial powers from its surroundings and ensure that no state in the region would fall to European influence. Respect for the sovereign integrity of other countries was essential to its leadership role across North and South America and to strategic stability. The strategic

environments of the US and India do not share the same views on pursuing extraterritorial ambitions in their respective regions. The US version of the Monroe Doctrine succeeded because the US had no immediate rival in the region and had no territorial expansionist ambitions towards other countries. Rather, it was based on protecting regional sovereignty by limiting external intervention in the Western Hemisphere.

The naval build-ups of India are advancing within a fundamentally different strategic environment. Because no power claims hegemony over the IOR against India, the region is an open and bustling maritime route for global trade. The evolution of India's role from free-rider to Strongman questions maritime freedom for sustaining sea lines of communication (SLOC) and its impact on the strategic stability of South Asia. India employs the Monroe Doctrine to define its strategic interests in the IOR and the Indian Ocean as an India-centric region (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2009). India strategically positions itself in the US-China strategic tussle in the Indo-Pacific to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region. India's geostrategic location makes it a frontline partner in the US strategy of offshore balancing against China in the IOR, while also serving its ambitions of maritime dominance rooted in Mahan-Panikkar strategic thought. But India's strategic alignment shifts the balance of power (BOP), which troubles the maritime security environment for other regional countries.

India-Pakistan's longstanding rivalry and recent standoffs push Pakistan into a maritime security dilemma and an arms race, and deepen deterrence fragility as India's maritime strategy is executed through its naval modernization (Shah 2022). Spiral model theory gives a clear understanding of such a phenomenon: that one state's arms build-ups can increase security anxiety in neighbouring states, as states are uncertain about the intentions behind the arms build-ups, whether an act of aggression or security measures. In both cases, neighbouring states are forced to react, which develops an action-reaction cycle of an arms race and heightens the chances of conflict (Kydd, 1997).

The 21st century has made the Indo-Pacific the epicentre of global power projection, driven by the US-China rivalry and maritime competition across two vast bodies of water: The Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. From a realist perspective, any strategic move by a country creates a security dilemma for others in the region due to an asymmetric security balance. Considering this logic, Indian naval modernization, which it justifies in

response to China's countermeasures, does not rule out the strategic implications for Pakistan and other regional states in South Asia (Khan and Khan 2025). Since both countries have second-strike capability within their nuclear triads, this ensures sea-based deterrence. However, in the post-2015 strategic landscape, India's focus on naval modernization is driving the region into an arms race at sea, which threatens deterrence stability and further exacerbates military asymmetry, challenging Pakistan's sea-based deterrence capability.

In the absence of a formal arms control mechanism between India and Pakistan, such as the 1972 ABM treaty between the US and USSR, which assured both states of the capability to retaliate to address mutual vulnerability and enhance mutual deterrence. India's expanding maritime capabilities erode mutual vulnerability, which is the cornerstone of stable nuclear deterrence. Since 2015, India has accelerated its naval modernization, including carriers and submarine fleets, such as SSBN and SSK classes, to enhance its offensive capabilities through sea-based delivery systems (Khan & Khan, 2025). According to Mahanian theory, the absolute control of the oceans requires a large naval force and the ability to project power, both of which reflect a state's offensive intent and capabilities. The larger a state's navy, the more control it has over the oceans.

While Sir Julian Corbett, a British naval strategist, argues that a state should develop its naval force for defensive purposes, he insisted on a balance between offense and defense because the goal is to protect the interests with limited capabilities. Mahan and Corbettian methodologies help explain the intent and capabilities of a state's naval buildups and ambitions (Armstrong 2022). The current status of the Indian Naval inventory is: 2 aircraft carriers (INS Vikramaditya, a Soviet-era Kiev-class carrier commissioned in 2013; INS Vikrant, an indigenous carrier commissioned in 2022), 3 SSBNs, 16 SSKs (total 20) Submarines, 13 destroyers, 14 frigates, and 18 corvettes (Pasricha, 2026). Indian naval build-ups are proceeding in parallel with what Mahan said earlier. Pakistan's naval capabilities align with Corbettian theory: it has a limited number of naval fleets to protect SLOCs, ports, maritime borders, and strategic locations, and it deploys the Babur-3 cruise missile, with a range of 700 km, in response to India's sea-launched K-series missiles (Association, 2018).

India has built a large naval force for power projection. Despite Pakistan's multiple efforts through Strategic Restraint Regimes (SRR) to limit the arms

race in the region for peace and deterrence stability, these efforts failed to yield results due to a lack of will on India's part. Pakistan insisted on Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) to discuss emerging challenges and the deterrence crisis posed by Ballistic Missile Defence systems, Hypersonic missiles, and a Nuclear-free Indian Ocean (Afzal, 2020). Contrary to India's much larger and advanced sea-based naval forces, Pakistan has kept its naval forces limited to deterrence stability vis-à-vis India. Ultimately, the clash between Mahanian offensive intent (India) and Corbettian defensive restraint (Pakistan) defines the current crisis. India's technological acceleration suggests a preference for military asymmetry over diplomatic stability. This shift from a maritime security provider to a hegemonic actor heightens the risk of inadvertent escalation, transforming the IOR into a volatile arena of existential catastrophe.

CONCLUSION

India's naval expansion represents a fundamental shift from traditional coastal defense toward a blue-water power-projection capability. While New Delhi frames this modernization as a response to the China factor, its operational footprint increasingly overlaps with Pakistan's primary maritime interests in the North Arabian Sea. This expansionist posturing, characterized by the induction of SSBNs and aircraft carrier strike groups, reshapes the IOR from a shared common into a contested theater. If India seeks to replicate a modern Monroe Doctrine to dominate the IOR, it overlooks a critical geopolitical reality: unlike the 19th century US, India is not an isolated hegemon. Instead, the South Asian maritime landscape is a volatile environment defined by two nuclear-armed rivals and unresolved territorial disputes. Consequently, India's quest for net security provider status is perceived by its neighbors not as a stabilizing force but as a catalyst for a regional security dilemma.

The introduction of sea-based nuclear assets, such as the Arihant-class submarines and K-4 missiles, complicates the strategic calculus between India and Pakistan. This naval-nuclear nexus creates a paradox: while sea-based second-strike capabilities theoretically enhance survivability, they simultaneously introduce risks of maritime entanglement. In a crisis, the lack of underwater transparency and the dual-use nature of modern platforms (conventional vs nuclear) increase the risk of miscalculation. Pakistan's shift toward Full-Spectrum Deterrence, including the development of the Babur-3 SLCM and an emphasis on Sea Denial (A2/AD)

strategies, is a direct response to this perceived strategic encirclement. As India pushes for oceanic exclusivity, Pakistan is compelled to pursue asymmetric countermeasures, leading to a costly and destabilizing arms race that diverts resources from the Blue Economy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To prevent the Indian Ocean from becoming a flashpoint for unintended escalation, a transition from unilateral dominance to collaborative security is essential. The following policy frameworks should be considered:

1. Establishment of Maritime Confidence-Building Measures (MCBMs): Both states should formalize an Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreement to manage unintended encounters. This includes setting up dedicated naval hotlines and establishing protocols for the prior notification of long-range missile tests and large-scale naval exercises.
2. Nuclear Risk Reduction at Sea: Transparency regarding the deployment of nuclear-capable platforms is vital. A bilateral agreement to maintain nuclear-free zones in certain sensitive areas of the Arabian Sea could reduce the pressure on commanders to use or lose their assets during a crisis.
3. Multilateral Maritime Governance: Rather than pursuing hegemonic doctrines, regional actors should strengthen the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Transitioning to a collective security architecture enables joint responses to non-traditional threats, such as piracy, climate change, and illegal fishing, without exacerbating traditional rivalries.
4. Economic Stabilization through the Blue Economy: Shifting the narrative from naval power to oceanic prosperity can incentivize cooperation. Collaborative efforts in marine research and sustainable trade routes could serve as a Track II diplomatic bridge, lowering the strategic temperature in the region.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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