ISSUE BRIEF

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES ISLAMABAD
Web: www.issi.org.pk
Phone: +92-51-9204423, 24
Fax: +92-51-9204658

INDIA'S CONVENTIONAL MILITARY BUILDUP: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIAN STRATEGIC STABILITY

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow
Arms Control & Disarmament Centre, ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

April 18, 2023

India has been investing massively in its conventional military capabilities in recent years. This includes modernizing its existing weaponry, procurement of new weapons systems, and upgrading infrastructure. India's military buildup includes enhancing its air defense capabilities, acquiring advanced fighter jets, submarines, and surface ships, strengthening its missile defense system, and improving its communication and surveillance capabilities. India's military spending was the third highest in the world at $76.6 billion in 2021.[1] According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data, India was the largest arms importer in the world during 2013-17 and spent around $100 billion during that time to modernize its military capabilities.[2] India has spent another $24 billion to acquire equipment from countries like the US, Russia, France, Spain and Israel in the last five years which include helicopters, aircraft radars, rockets, guns, assault rifles, missiles and ammunitions.[3] India is thus spending billions of dollars to strengthen its military capabilities. This is altering the balance of power in the

1 "World Military Expenditure Passes $2 trillion for first time," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), April 25, 2022, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time

2 Rahul Singh, "India Still Largest Arms Importer, Spent more than $100 b in last 10 years: SIPRI," Hindustan Times, March 12, 2018 https://bit.ly/2P46Frw

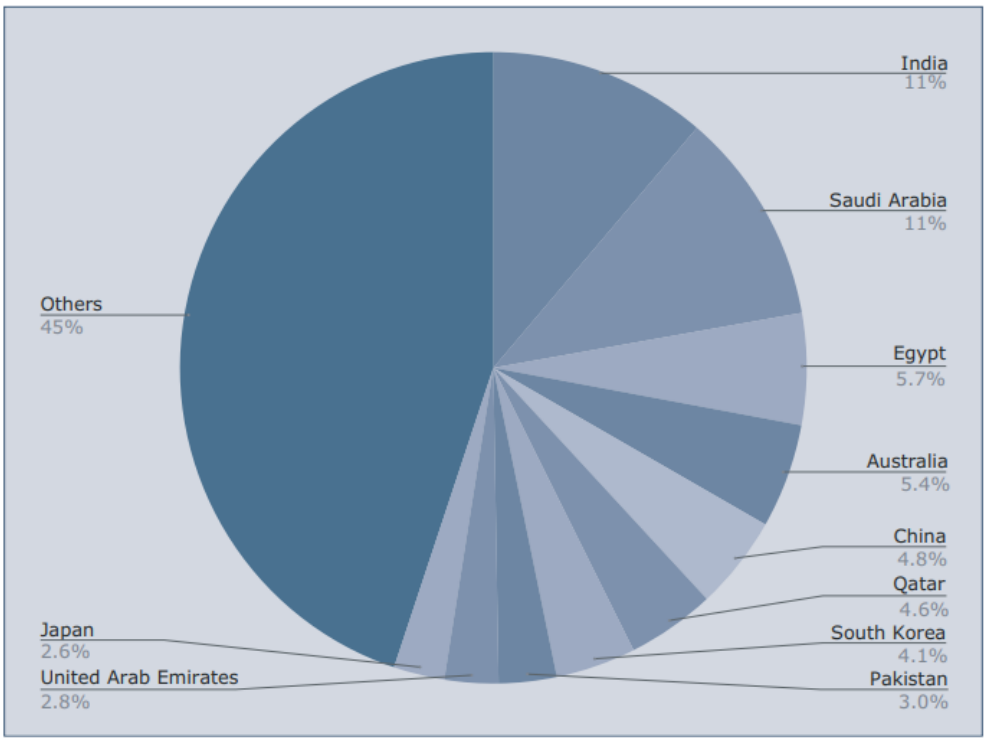
3 "India spent $24 billion for buying foreign defence items in the Last 5 Years," *Times of India*, Feb 4, 2023

region and has a number of implications. It is important to assess the nature of India's conventional military buildup and its implications for the region especially Pakistan and strategic stability in South Asia. The article would mainly focus on Indian conventional build up from 2017 onwards.

India's Major Arms Imports

India has been importing major arms and weapons systems over the years. It major weapons supplier have mainly been Russia, France, US and Israel.

Global Share of Imports of Major Arms by the 10 largest importers, 2017–21



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2022

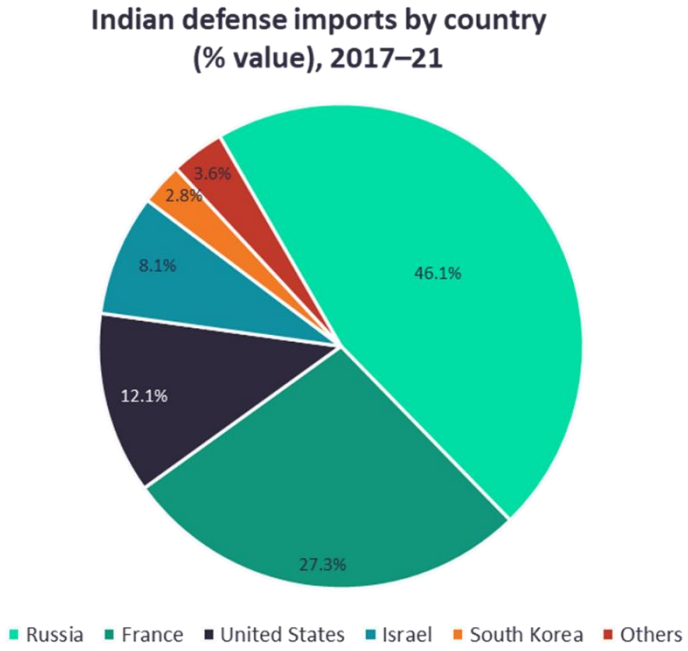
According to SIPRI data India was the world's largest importer of major arms during 2017–21 and accounted for 11% of total global arms imports in this period. Russia had been the largest supplier of arms to India in 2012–16 as well as 2017–21. However, India's imports of Russian arms dropped by 47 per cent between the two periods as several large programmes for Russian arms wound down. India has also been trying to diversify its arms suppliers. It is trying to reduce its dependence on Russian arms. India's arms imports from France have increased more than tenfold. Such that France

is now India's second largest arms supplier in 2017–21.[4] The US-India defence trade has increased significantly. In just two decades it has increased from $200 million in 2000 to over $21 billion in 2021.[5] India is investing heavily in acquiring major weapons systems as well as promoting indigenous production under the "Make in India" initiative. This is all in line with India's ambitions to become a major power at land, air and sea.

The 5 largest Importers of Major Arms and Main Suppliers, 2017–21

	Importer	Share of global arms imports (%) 2017–21	2012–16	Per cent change from 2012–16 to 2017–21[a]	Main suppliers (share of importer's total imports, %), 2017–21 1st		2nd		3rd	
1	India	11	14	-21	Russia	(46)	France	(27)	USA	(12)
2	Saudi Arabia	11	8.2	27	USA	(82)	France	(5.1)	UK	(5.0)
3	Egypt	5.7	3.2	73	Russia	(41)	France	(21)	Italy	(15)
4	Australia	5.4	3.2	62	USA	(67)	Spain	(24)	Switzerland	(3.3)
5	China	4.8	4.4	4.1	Russia	(81)	France	(9.1)	Ukraine	(5.9)

Source: Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers," SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf



Source: GlobalData Intelligence

4 Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers," SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf

5 Douglas Barrie and Viraj Solanki "Purchasing from a pariah: India's arms-acquisition dilemma," March 22, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/03/purchasing-from-a-pariah-indias-arms-acquisition-dilemma

Indian Naval Ambitions

The Indian Navy, already the fifth largest in the world, has in recent years been rapidly modernizing in a drive to develop blue-water capabilities and increase its prowess in the Indian Ocean. India's naval ambitions are part of efforts to attain 'major power' status.

Indian Navy currently has 295 total naval assets and has ambitions to include 200 more warships and 500 aircraft in its arsenal. It has spent billions of dollars in order to expand the size of its navy in the last decade. India has not only boosted its naval vessels building capacity in recent years, but also made acquisitions from abroad. This expansion in capabilities includes stealth destroyers, anti-submarine corvettes and stealth frigates as well as warships. Indian Navy's long-term plan to operate 18 conventionally powered as well as six nuclear-powered submarines. It already operates two nuclear powered submarines -- Arihant and Arighat. It operates two aircraft carriers, including the INS Vikramaditya, which can carry more than 30 aircraft.[6] India inducted its second indigenously built aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant in August 2022. It has plans to procure 57 multirole fighter aircraft for INS Vikrant. It has already acquired 5 Scorpene submarines from France as well as other anti-ship missiles and sonars.

India's Major Weapons Acquisitions From France 2017-21

Supplier/ recipient (R)	No. ordered	Weapon designation	Weapon description	Year(s) of order	Year Weapon delivery	No. delivered	Comments
France							
R: India	24	FLASH	ASW sonar	2021	2021	(3)	ASQ-22 ALFS version; for 24 MH-60R ASW helicopters from USA; from US production line
	16	PA6	diesel engine	(2003)	2014-2020	16	For 4 Kamorta (Project-28) frigates produced in India; probably produced under licence in India
	6	Scorpene	submarine	2005	2017-2021	5	INR207-237 b ($3.2-4.5 b) 'Project-75' programme; produced under licence in India as Kalvari
	(49)	Mirage-2000-5	FGA aircraft	2011	2015-2021	(26)	INR109-175 b deal ($2.3-2.6 b; offsets $593 m); Indian Mirage-2000H rebuilt to Mirage-2000-5; incl 2 rebuilt in France and rest in India; delivery planned 2015-2025
	36	Rafale	FGA aircraft	2017	2019-2021	36	EUR7.8 b deal
	8	SA-316B Alouette-3	light helicopter	2017	2019-2020	(8)	INR3.2 b deal; produced under licence in India as Chetak
	10	SA-315B Lama	light helicopter	(2018)	2021	(1)	Cheetal version; produced under licence in India; delivery planned from 2021
	36	SM-39 Exocet	anti-ship missile	2005	2017-2021	(28)	Possibly $150 m deal; SM-39 Block-2 version; for Scorpene submarines
	(200)	Storm Shadow/SCALP	ASM	2017	2020-2021	(170)	Part of EUR710 m deal; SCALP version; for Rafale combat aircraft
	(300)	AASM Hammer	ASM	2020	2020-2021	(160)	For Rafale combat aircraft
	13	Mirage-2000	FGA aircraft	2021			Second-hand; EUR27 m deal

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, generated on March 1, 2023

India's cooperation with Russia goes back a few decades. While India is trying to reduce its reliance on Russian weaponry, it is still India's largest weapons supplier. India has inducted Russian MiG-29K

6 "INS Vikrant: Inside India's newly-commissioned aircraft carrier," *BBC News*, September 2, 2022,

multirole aircraft and Kamov-28 and 31 helicopters to deploy from its aircraft carriers.[7] Russia has not only cooperated with India in producing Brahmos cruise missile, leased it submarines and an aircraft carrier but also provided the S-400 missile defence systems.

India's Major Weapons Acquisitions From Russia 2017-21

Supplier/ recipient (R)	ordered	No. designation	Weapon description	Year(s) Weapon of order	Year delivery	of delivered	No. Comments
Russia							
R: India							
	(400)	PJ-10 BrahMos	anti-ship missile/SSM	(1998)	2006-2021	(225)	Joint venture mainly using Russian technology from Yakhont (SS-N-26) anti-ship missile; produced under licence in India
	(400)	PJ-10 BrahMos	SSM	1998	2006-2021	(370)	Joint venture mainly using Russian technology from Yakhont (SS-N-26) anti-ship missile; produced under licence in India
	140	Su-30MK	FGA aircraft	(2001)	2005-2021	(140)	$3-5.4 b deal; Su-30 MKI version; produced under licence in India
	8	RBU-6000	ASW MRL	(2003)	2014-2020	8	For 4 Kamorta (Project-28) frigates produced in India; produced under licence in India
	(63)	MiG-29SMT	FGA aircraft	2008	2012-2021	(55)	$850-965 m deal; Indian MiG-29 rebuilt to MiG-29UPG (MiG-29SMT); most rebuilt under licence in India
	(100)	PJ-10 BrahMos-A	ASM	(2012)			Joint development mainly using Russian technology; for Su-30 combat aircraft; delivery from 2022
	8	RBU-6000	ASW MRL	(2013)	2021	2	For 4 Visakhapatnam (Project-15B) destroyers produced in India
	236	T-90S	tank	(2013)	2018-2021	(200)	INR60 b deal; produced under licence in India
	4	Talwar	frigate	2018			Incl 2 produced in India; delivery planned 2023-2026
	464	T-90S	tank	2019			INR200b ($2.8 b) deal (incl up to 80% produced in India); delivery planned by 2023/2025
	(12)	Su-30MK	FGA aircraft	(2021)			INR107 b ($1.4 b) deal; Su-30MKI version; produced under licence in India; delivery planned 2024-2025; not ordered by end-2021
	(350)	48N6	SAM	(2018)	2021	(70)	Part of INR390 b ($5 b) for S-400 SAM systems
	10	S-400 Triumf	SAM system	2018	2021	2	INR390 b ($5.4 b) deal; delivery planned 2021-2023
	1	Project-971I	nuclear submarine	2019			$3 b deal for 10-year lease; Indian designation Chakra-3; delivery planned 2025

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, generated on February 28, 2023

There is also increased defence cooperation between US and India under which the latter is acquiring considerable military equipment. In May 2021, the US government approved the sale of six P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft to India which are aimed at strengthening the navy's "maritime domain awareness."[8] In 2019, the US approved the sale of 24 MH-60 R helicopters to India worth $2.6 billion.[9] The US State department claimed that it would support foreign and security policy of the US by strengthening a major defensive partner. This is meant to build up India's offensive power at sea against Chinese increasing influence in the Indian Ocean. The helicopters would give India formidable anti-submarine capabilities. This is a threat for Pakistan that relies on a

7 Interview of Chietigj Bajpaee by Srinivas Mazumdaru, "Naval Build-up Reflects India's Ambition to Project Power," Deutsche Welle, http://www.dw.com/en/navalbuildup-reflects-indias-ambition-to-project-power/a-18275292

8 Military Balance, 2022, P. 227

9 Franz-Stefan Gady. "US State Department Approves Sale of 24 MH-60R Helicopters to India." *The Diplomat*, April 4, 2019. https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/us-state-department-approves-sale-of-24-mh-60r-helicopters-to-india/.

limited number of submarines for its conventional defence. This undermines Pakistan's naval strike capabilities in a conflict.

India's Major Weapons Acquisitions From US 2017-21

Recipient/ supplier (S)	No. ordered	Weapon designation	Weapon description	Year(s) of order	Year Weapon delivery	No. delivered	Comments
India							
S: United States	6	C-130J-30 Hercules	transport aircraft	2013	2017	6	Probably $1.1 b deal (30% offsets including production in India of components for all future C-130J); for special forces
	22	AH-64E Apache	combat helicopter	2015	2019-2020	22	$1.2-1.4 b deal (incl production of components in India; part of $2.4 b deal)
	4	P-8A Poseidon	ASW aircraft	2016	2020-2021	(4)	$1-1.1 b deal (incl production of components in India)
	6	AH-64E Apache	combat helicopter	2020			$800 m deal; incl production of components in India; delivery planned from 2023
	15	CH-47F Chinook	transport helicopter	2015	2019-2020	(15)	$1 b deal (part of $2.4 b deal); CH-47F(I) version
	1	C-17A Globemaster-3	heavy transport ac	2017	2019	1	$262 m deal
	1	C-130J-30 Hercules	transport aircraft	(2018)	2019	1	
	24	MH-60R Seahawk	ASW helicopter	2020	2021	(3)	$2.6 b 'N-MRH' programme; delivery planned 2021-2024
	2	RQ-1 Predator	UAV	2020	2020	2	1-year lease

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, generated: February 28, 2023

India is also procuring 30 MQ-9B Predator armed drones from the US at the cost of $3 billion. They are medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) hunter-killer drones capable of maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and hitting ground targets. The drones are for long endurance and high-altitude surveillance and are armed with Hellfire missiles, expected to increase India's overall surveillance capabilities along its borders with China, Pakistan and the Indian Ocean. Each of the three Indian services is likely to get 10 drones.[10] The Predator drones would give India an advantage in terms of reconnaissance along the border with China as well as its border with Pakistan. They give intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) advantage on the battlefield and act as force multipliers. At sea they would provide over-the-horizon ISR support for surface units and Indian warships. This would augment Indian naval strike and reconnaissance capabilities.[11]

These defence equipment transfers are an important part of Indo-US defence cooperation. It serves to improve India's military capabilities and US intent to enhance the interoperability of Indian and US forces. There is a convergence of interests whereby India is being built up as a "counterweight" to China, while it also aligns with Indian ambitions to attain the status of a 'major power.'

10 "India's $3 billion Predator Drone Deal with US at Advanced Stage, certain issues being sorted out," Times of India, August 21, 2022, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indias-3-billion-predator-drone-dealwith-us-at-advanced-stages-certain-issues-being-sorted-out-report/articleshow/93689865.cms

11 For detailed analysis see Ghazala Yasmin Jalil "Indian Pursuit of Armed Drones: Implications and Challenges," Issue Brief, Oct 13, 2022,

Indian Army

Indian Army's thinking centers around fighting a quick, limited war against Pakistan. Its doctrinal shift towards Cold Start Doctrine is aimed at quick mobilization of its forces and shallow incursions into Pakistan. Its 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine also follows the same thinking aimed at quick, swift and intense limited war with smaller strike formations into Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) to carry out small scale incursions below Pakistan's nuclear threshold. Indian military modernization is in line with this thinking. It is, thus, developing and procuring tanks, advanced missiles and artillery systems with enhanced firepower. It acquired 464 T-90 MBTs worth US$2 billion from Russia. The Indian Army is in the process of acquiring K9 Vajra 155 mm/52 calibre guns from South Korea under US$720 million contract.[12] India has also focused on enhancing indigenous production.

Indian Air Power

Indian Air force (IAF) is the 4th largest in the world with 2210 aircraft strength. In recent years, India has been building up its air power as well. IAF relies heavily on its multi-mission SU-30MKI aircraft, which can deliver many kinds of weapons and deploys more than 200 SU-30MKI aircraft, and it has ordered an additional 53 aircraft from Russian defense companies. Also, in a deal worth $8.7 billion, India purchased 36 Rafael aircraft from France which has a speed of 1,915 km/h and can transport a variety of warheads at 1,850 km/h. It can hit a target with a precision of 10 meters.[13] India has also acquired 26 Mirage 2000 aircraft so far from France that were involved in the Indian strike in Balakot in February 2019. In 2020, the US delivered 22 Apache attack helicopters, equipped with laser and infrared systems for day-night operations and are armed with air-to-surface Hellfire missiles. India also acquired 15 Chinook helicopters in 2020 from the US.[14] Both systems have been inducted in Indian Air Force. India has also acquired transport aircraft C-130J Hercules from the US that can be used for logistical missions, hard-surface rescue missions, and special combat operations.[15] The IAF also purchased 11 C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft worth $4.1 billion from Boeing to improve its

12 Rahul Singh, "India World's 5th Largest Military Spender: 7 Weapon Systems Govt is Buying," Hindustan Times, April 27, 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/shelling-out-on-defence-7-weapon-systems-india-is-buying-to-build-its-military-muscle/story-ZJ3QAoMfncQeeXivd8UutO.html.

13 "Dassault Rafael Multi-role 4th Generation Fighter," *Military Factory*, March 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/2sb5ZI

14 "India now armed with all 22 Apache gunships, 15 Chinook heavy cargo helicopters," Defence Capital, July 10, 2020, https://defence.capital/2020/07/10/india-now-armed-with-all-22-apache-gunships-15-chinook-heavy-cargo-helicopters/

15 "C-130J Super Hercules," Lockheed Martin, March 20, 2017, http://lmt.co/2m1cH0H

capacity to provide vital logistics, food, supplies, ammunition, and reinforcements on high altitudes and land.[16]

Air Defence Systems and Ballistic Missile Defence

India has also been working on enhancing its air and missile defence capabilities. In 2017, India concluded a near $2 billion deal with Israel for an advanced medium-range surface-to-air (MRSAM) missile system or Barak 8 with 70 km range and long-range surface-to-air (LRSAM) missile system, also known as Barak LR with 90-150 km range. The LRSAM are to be deployed on its aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, Visakhapatnam-class guided missile destroyers, Kolkata-class destroyers, Kamorta-class anti-submarine warfare corvettes, and stealth frigates. They have been deployed on three Kolkata-class vessels.[17] Indian Army is also set to receive a regiment of 16 launchers and 560 missiles. This gives India short range missile defence capabilities at sea as well as on land.

India also negotiated a deal for the purchase of five S-400 missile defense systems with a cost of $5.5 billion from Russia in 2018. Two of the batteries have already been delivered and deployed. India is using it with its indigenous missile defence system comprised of the Advanced Air Defence for low altitude interception and Prithvi Air Defence systems for high altitude interception.[18] The indigenous and acquired systems give India a layered defence against incoming missiles. Although missile defence systems do not provide assured protection, they give a false sense of security to India. India is likely to act with aggression in a conflict secure in the knowledge that it will be able to, in theory, counter any attack with its missile defence systems. This is destabilizing for South Asian deterrence. It also encourages preemption.

Implications for South Asian Strategic Stability

India's rapid military modernization is widening the conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan. Pakistan does not wish to indulge in an arms race with India. However, rapid Indian military modernisation is exacerbating Pakistan's security dilemma. India and Pakistan have a rough conventional ratio of 2:1. The eminent scholar John Mearsheimer said that between forces of comparable quality and firepower, the attacker will need a force, which is three times or larger if it

16 "India Takes Delivery of 11th C-17 Globemaster From United States", *The Diplomat*, Aug 30, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/india-takes-delivery-of-11th-c-17-globemaster-from-united-states/

17 Franz-Stefan Gady, "India, Israel Conclude $2 Billion Missile Deal." *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/india-israel-conclude-2-billion-missile-deal/

18 For details see Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Indian Missile Defence Development: Implications for Deterrence Stability in South Asia," Strategic Studies, No. 35, Vol. 2, 2016.

wants to achieve a breakthrough i.e. a ratio of 3:1 or higher to ensure success.[19] With India rapidly building up its conventional capabilities, the conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan is increasing. India may be tempted to go for limited war options against Pakistan or it may even encourage preemption. This is likely to trigger further arms races in the region, undermining the deterrence stability and strategic stability in South Asia.

India and Pakistan Military Capabilities		
	India	**Pakistan**
Defence Budgets in 2021 (US $ Billion)	**76.6** (Increased 0.9% from 2020)	**10.39**
Active personnel	1,450,000	651,800
Total Aircraft	**Total: 2210** Fighter: 577 Attack: 130 Transport: 254 Trainer: 353 Special Mission: 73 Tanker Fleet: 6 Helicopters: 807 Attack Helicopters: 36	Total: 1387 Fighter: 363 Fighter Atttack:90 Transport: 59 Trainer: 550 Special Mission:25 Tanker Fleet: 4 Helicopters: 322 Attack Helicopters:58
Tanks	**4614**	**3,742**
Armoured Vehicles	**12000**	**9,950**
Self-Propelled Artillery	**100**	**1,225**
Towed Artillery	**3311**	**3,345**
Rocket Projectors	**1500**	**1,838**
Air Craft Carrier	**2**	**0**
Destroyers	**11**	**2**
Frigates	**12**	**6**
Corvettes	**19**	**2**
Submarines	**18**	**9**
Petrol Vessels	**138**	**48**
Total Naval Assets	**295**	**114**

Source: "World Military Expenditure Passes $2 trillion for first time," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), April 25, 2022, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time; "India Military Strength," Global Fire Power, access date, February 7, 2023, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=india; "Pakistan Military Strength" Global Fire Power, access date, February 13, 2023, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=pakistan

India's naval expansion is driven by a desire to dominate in the Indian Ocean region. India, armed with aircraft carriers, advanced attack warships, submarines, ballistic and cruise missiles, anti-submarine helicopters, and advanced drones is aimed at dominating the Indian Ocean. With India seeking to become the 'hegemon' in the region, it affects the security of all the littoral states in Indian Ocean as well as Pakistan. Moreover, US active defence cooperation with India in a bid to

19 John Mearsheimer, "Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3:1 Rule and Its Critics." *International Security,* 13 (1989): 54 - 89.

counterbalance growing Chinese influence is bringing further instability to South Asia. While Indian naval prowess is problematic for Pakistan, Pak Navy has the capability to defend its territorial water against Indian aggression.

While each of Indian weapons systems provides a challenge for Pakistan, the combined effect of its military modernization is a bigger challenge still. India has also been working on space military programme with 17 dedicated military satellites that provide ISR, communication, navigation and targeting information to the Indian armed forces. When this is coupled with India's rapid military modernization, its pursuit of ballistic missile defense capabilities, a triad of nuclear forces, anti-submarine capability, it would further increase Indian aggressive tendencies like the post-Pulwama incident. This bodes ill for the peace and security of the region. With increased military power, India is also likely to be confrontational with China.

Conclusion

Pakistan has a number of options that it can pursue in order to counter instability introduced by Indian military build-up. Pakistan must take the path to indigenization in defence equipment. It will have the dual advantage of being cost effective as well as having the potential to export and bring in capital. Pakistan must couple it with superior training and strategy to counter conventional imbalance with India. Pakistan must pursue a space programme that would provide better communication, navigation and ISR capabilities to its armed forces. Last but not least, Pakistan must rely on its nuclear deterrence to counter conventional disparity with India. However, above all there is a need for the international community to realize that arms do not ultimately bring security to anyone and must condemn the pursuit of weapons. Humanity is faced with bigger security challenges like poverty, natural disasters, human security and climate change where all the financial resources must be poured.