

INDIA'S NAVAL DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN AND SOUTH ASIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Background

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is vitally important for continents like Europe, Asia, Africa, and America because of its location. It is one of the most important trade routes, accounting for almost 80 percent of global maritime transportation.¹ Moreover, the abundant resources in this region enhance this importance. Almost 40 percent of global oil production happens along the coastlines of IOR.² That is why this region's strategic importance cannot be ignored; it is the backbone of its economic development. The strategic significance of the IOR forces the regional players to continuously seek to enhance their influence in the Indian Ocean. Hence, the power struggle in the IOR is never-ending.

The primary focus of this Issue Brief is to determine the potential implications of India's naval expansion in the IOR on the strategic stability of South Asia. The main argument is that India is advancing its conventional and nuclear naval capabilities that threaten the region. It is thus important to examine what the Indian naval development is about and how that will impact regional stability.

¹ Darshana M. Baruah Greely Nitya Labh, Jessica, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 14, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/06/15/mapping-indian-ocean-region-pub-89971>.

² Ibid.

India's Recent Naval Developments

India contends that its economic and security interests are closely linked to the IOR's dynamics, as it occupies 40 percent of the strategic waterways.³ India's resolve to achieve naval dominance is evident from its ongoing naval deployments and future plans. It has made substantial progress in improving its naval capabilities, prioritizing independent advancement and strategic collaborations. India's recent aircraft carrier projects are highlighted below:

Table 1

Aircraft Craft carriers	Capacity	Specification
INS Vikrant ⁴	45,000-ton	Flagship Aircraft Carrier
INS Vishal (by 2030) ⁵	65000-75000-ton	Inaugural Nuclear-powered Aircraft Carrier

These aircraft carriers are domestically constructed naval resources and indicate a deliberate action to strengthen the country's naval capabilities by adopting state-of-the-art technologies. The Project 15 Bravo,⁶ also known as the Visakhapatnam Class Destroyer, incorporates advanced technologies such as automation and stealth. Some upcoming warship projects of the Indian Navy (IN) are given below:

Table 2

Projects	Specifications
INS Surat ⁷	Guided Missile Destroyer
INS Imphal ⁸	Equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, including surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles, and torpedoes
Project-17 Alpha ⁹	Aims to improve the Radar Cross-Section (RCS), Stealth Capabilities

³ Capsnetdroff, "India Must Seize the Opportunity in the Indian Ocean," *CAPS India* (blog), June 9, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/india-must-seize-the-opportunity-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

⁴ Alex Gatopoulos, "INS Vikrant: Why India's Aircraft Carrier Is No Match for China," *Al Jazeera*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/9/8/ins-vikrant-why-indias-aircraft-carrier-is-no-match-for-china>.

⁵ N. C. Bipindra, "INS Vishal: 9 Reasons Why India's 3rd Aircraft Carrier Is An Absolute Must To Counter China, Safeguards IOR," *Latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News* (blog), December 10, 2023, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/easons-why-india-needs-a-third-aircraft-carrie/>.

⁶ Xavier Vavasseur, "Indian Navy Commissions Second Project 15B Destroyer," *Naval News* (blog), December 19, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/12/indian-navy-commissions-second-project-15b-destroyer/>.

⁷ "INS Imphal To Start Trials : Next Generation Destroyers Order By 2025, Will Cost \$7.5 Billion," August 24, 2022, <https://theigmp.org/ins-imphal-to-start-trials-next-generation-destroyers-order-by-2025-will-cost-7-5-billion/>.

⁸ Sumeda, "Explained: The Significance of India's New Indigenous Warships Surat and Udaygiri," *The Hindu*, May 18, 2022, sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-the-twin-launch-of-indigenous-indian-navy-warships-surat-and-udaygiri/article65423044.ece>.

⁹ "India Launches Last Project 17A Nilgiri Class Frigate Mahendragiri," *Navy Naval News Navy Recognition*, September 1, 2023, <https://navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2023/september/13524-india-launches-last-project-17a-nilgiri-class-frigate-mahendragiri.html>.

India plans to introduce these ships into service between 2025 and 2027.¹⁰ Its objective is to expand its submarine fleet to 24 by 2030¹¹ by adding the platforms mentioned in Table 3:

Table 3

Submarines	Aerial Capabilities	UAVs
S-5 Class	Boeing P-8I Poseidon	MQ-9B Sea Guardian
Project 75 Alpha	Dornier 228	Naval Shipborne
Chakra III (Akula) Class	Kamov Ka-31	
Arihant Class	Sikorsky MH-60R Romeo	
	Indian Multi-Role Helicopter	

The IN has also invested in UAVs for maritime surveillance and reconnaissance.¹² Furthermore, India's dedication to enhancing its aerial capabilities is evident through utilizing diverse helicopters and aircraft. India's naval capabilities result from domestic production, strategic alliances, and a future-oriented aspiration for a strong and technologically sophisticated naval fleet.

India has been constructing a naval fleet capable of operating in deep waters to enhance its maritime capabilities. To achieve its objective of becoming an influential regional power, it is enhancing its naval nuclear capabilities. Presently, the IN possesses 150 ships and submarines¹³ and 300 aircraft and plans to acquire nine Medium Range Maritime Reconnaissance (MRMR) aircraft, while the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) intends to procure six Multi-Mission Maritime Aircraft (MMA).¹⁴

The IN's capabilities and financial resources are steadily growing and becoming more robust. The IN has secured financing of 450 million INR to enhance its assets, as projected in the 2022–2023 budget. Furthermore, the Navy is projected to be allocated approximately US\$2700 million for its

¹⁰ "Taragiri, India's Fifth Stealth Frigate of Project 17A, Launched | All You Need to Know in 10 Points," *CNBC TV18*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.cnbcTV18.com/india/taragiri-fifth-stealth-frigate-project-17a-launched-capabilities-10-points-14705131.htm>.

¹¹ Ranjit Kumar, "Ageing Submarine Fleet Raises Security Concerns," *SPs Naval Forces*, May 2023, <https://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=843&h=Ageing-Submarine-Fleet-Raises-Security-Concerns>.

¹² Pradip R. Sagar, "India-US Drone Deal | A Long Drone Process," *India Today*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/defence/story/20230724-india-us-drone-deal-a-long-drone-process-2406442-2023-07-14>.

¹³ Zahra Ahmed, "10 Major Indian Navy Vessels," *Marine Insight* (blog), December 4, 2023, <https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/major-indian-navy-vessels/>.

¹⁴ Adithya Krishna Menon, "Indian Navy, Coast Guard to Get 15 Maritime Patrol Aircraft Based on Airbus C-295," *Naval News* (blog), February 18, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/02/indian-navy-coast-guard-to-get-15-maritime-patrol-aircraft-based-on-airbus-c-295/>.

modernization requirements by 2026–2027, demonstrating a consistent yearly growth rate of 10 percent for naval modernization.¹⁵

Implications of India's expanding naval capabilities

In South Asia, the nuclear capabilities of the main adversaries, India and Pakistan, have helped maintain deterrence. However, the U.S.-China contestation and the increasing strategic importance of the region are resulting in re-thinking of the calculus of regional players. Enhanced U.S.-China competition is also affecting South Asia's nuclear balance. There is evidently a continuous cycle. The U.S.-China dynamic is used by India to enhance its capabilities vis-a-vis China, which in turn forces Pakistan to acquire capabilities to maintain strategic stability vis-à-vis India. Thus, India's upgradation of naval capabilities has greater implications for the region's strategic balance.

India's increasing naval advancements seek to alter the power dynamics of the IOR in its favor, resulting in military tensions with other states, especially Pakistan. India's aspirations can engender an arms race because other states may perceive them as a threat to their security and oblige them to enhance their naval capabilities to counter India, potentially leading to regional instability.

India's naval development could affect the region's economy by potentially increasing India's influence over trade routes and resources in the IOR, posing a threat to Pakistan and other nearby economies. This increasing tension in the naval paradigm can challenge Pakistan's capacity to secure its borders. Most of Pakistan's trade, specifically the oil trade, is managed by Karachi and Qasim Port and is fully carried out through them. So, security concerns are raised because of the threat of their monitoring and surveillance by India's advanced navigation system. India can restrict freedom of travel, communication, and access to maritime resources, posing a danger to all countries across the IOR.¹⁶ India's plan to install nuclear weapons in the ocean is a major threat. In response, Pakistan has been forced to develop viable counter-measures and opt to sustain a strong nuclear deterrence against India. The disparity between India and Pakistan's conventional naval capabilities heightens the threat perception for the latter.

India, with a six times larger Navy than Pakistan's, aims to enhance its naval fleet capabilities by 2027. This would heighten Pakistan's security concerns, widen the disparity between the naval capabilities of India and Pakistan, and resultantly accelerate the arms race in the region. India's

¹⁵ Global Defense Insight, "India's Naval Modernization and Expansion in Indian Ocean Region: Implications on Pakistan," *Global Defense Insight* (blog), December 31, 2022, <https://defensetalks.com/indias-naval-modernization-and-expansion-in-indian-ocean-region-implications-on-pakistan/>.

¹⁶ Rashmi Singh, "India's Maritime Security and Policy: An Imperative for the Blue Economy," in *India in South Asia: Challenges and Management*, ed. Amit Ranjan (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 269–89, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2020-0_17.

nuclear capabilities at sea could increase the likelihood of misperceptions, misunderstanding, accidental launch, or escalation, exacerbating an already perilous nuclear milieu.

Moreover, Pakistan harbors serious concerns regarding India's security partnership with the United States. India has established multiple agreements with other states, such as Australia, Japan, Mauritius, and others, to establish naval stations in the IOR. Pakistan perceives India's expansion in the region as assertive, hegemonic, and a threat to its security. Given Pakistan's economic constraints to massively upgrade its naval capacities, this could further skew the naval balance in India's favor.

Way Forward

These military advances largely influence Pakistan's security choices against India. Pakistan prioritizes strengthening its strategy of maintaining a credible minimum deterrence. In 2012, Pakistan established strategic forces command as a proactive measure to anticipate and address India's destabilizing aspirations in the IOR.¹⁷ Pakistan can potentially build a second-strike capability by implementing new strategies utilizing its diesel submarines and dual-purpose platforms. Considering the budgetary and time constraints, embracing this road appears advantageous. The sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) Babar III was effectively tested in 2017, demonstrating a range of 450 km.¹⁸ This highlights the timely technological progress in achieving a balance and maintaining strategic stability while addressing the strategic gaps created by India in South Asia.

Pakistan should not only focus on achieving technological advantage and stability but also employ diplomatic strategies to increase pressure on India over the risks associated with vertical proliferation. The international community must be aware of the perils associated with India's naval expansion as its implications would extend far beyond the confines of the Indian Ocean and the South Asian region. Risk reduction measures should be implemented to limit the possibilities of escalation and any unintended consequences. Otherwise, India's relentless expansion of its naval capabilities will result in a naval arms race in the Indian Ocean, putting peace and stability of the region at serious risk.

¹⁷ "NAVAL CHIEF INAUGURATES NAVAL STRATEGIC FORCE HEADQUARTERS PR-122/2012-ISPR," Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan, May 19, 2012, <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=2067>.

¹⁸ Bilal Khan, "Pakistan Announces Babur Sub-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) Test," *Quwa* (blog), March 29, 2018, <https://quwa.org/2018/03/29/pakistan-announces-babur-sub-launched-cruise-missile-slcm-test/>.