
Indian Naval Transformation under Modi Regime: Implications for Pakistan

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Humiliated India after wars with China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965 respectively compelled its policymakers to focus more on Eastern and Western borders. Indian excessive military expenditures on borders on account of territorial disputes with China and Pakistan enfeebled its naval power vis-à-vis China. The rise of China as an economic giant, by and large, brings geo-economic and geo-political dividends in its favor. China's Belt and Road Initiative BRI and its Sting of Pearls strategy put India in hot water. India, arguably, is unmatched with China in military modernization but leaves no stone unturned to complete with Beijing in naval race. New Delhi is a crucial strategic ally of the US and also is a part of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue QUAD, a group dominated by the US to contain China. The growing convergence of interests between the US and the India in the containment of China in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean buttresses the Indian naval power build up. Meanwhile, India under Modi regime compared to other regimes has made a rapid headway in naval expansion. Modi government has a six fold naval strategy encompassing increasing naval spending, fortifying command and control structure as well as the infrastructure of the navy force, adding to its naval capabilities and capacities, making active maritime diplomacy, carrying out exercises in the Indian Ocean and keeping the choke points open. This paper, thus, will analyze Indian naval modernization under the Modi regime. The paper will also gauge the implications of Indian naval modernization for the region in general and Pakistan particular.

Key Words: Indian Ocean Region IOR, Malabar Exercises, SIMBEX, LEMOA, Act East Policy

Introduction

The Indian Navy is consistently emerging as an important tool of India's foreign policy thereby compelling the Indian Naval thinkers and policy-makers to devise new strategies pertinent to the changing dynamics of the region. India regards Indian Ocean (IO) as its backyard forging instructive role in determining stability and security of the ocean. Not only does New Delhi view IO as a crucial strategic and geo-political maritime feature but the vitality of it in the global economic trade also prompts New Delhi to put focus on the strength of its Navy and make it integral part of Indian Grand Strategy¹.

India has constantly increasing maritime aspirations as evident from the statements of a number of Indian politicians, naval figures and the wider establishment. New Delhi has an explicitly self-confessed maritime strategy and contemporarily, the primary emphasis of its overall military thinking is naval-focused. Scott (2013) suggests that New Delhi has a naval strategy having six elements that include²:

- i. Increasing its naval spending
- ii. Fortifying the command and control structure as well as the infrastructure of the navy force
- iii. Adding to its naval capabilities and capacities
- iv. Activating maritime diplomacy
- v. Carrying out exercises in the Indian Ocean
- vi. Keeping the choke points open.

Through such a carefully thought out set of strategies and soft balancing with world powers like USA, India is looking forward to strengthening its position against what its policy makers perceive as a growing and impending Chinese challenge in the Indian Ocean. India realizes the growing competition in the Indian Ocean is taking steps necessary to counter the potential threats without pointing to a single challenge as evident from Indian Navy spokesperson's statement to Strait Times in which he states that it is prerequisite for India to enhance its foothold in regional level and show its presence in the IO. Under the Modi regime, these naval developments are accelerated to an unprecedented degree. India has started a desperate wave of negotiating agreements with a number of states in the littoral Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to gain military access to their bases. These agreements are believed to have been encompassing getting access to the Indonesian deep sea named as 'Sabang port' including the well-located

port of Oman Duqm paving the way for bolstering Indian position that invariably will create obstacles for China³.

Under the Modi regime, the Indian Navy came up with new commitments to indigenize the naval technology. This vision for the navy was a by-product of Modi's 'Make in Indi' policy. Recognizing this, the Indian Navy has introduced a new document called as 'Indian Naval Indigenization Plan (INIP) 2015-2030', outlining the significance of generating unconventional systems for its naval assets. Bearing in mind, this document has replaced the previous Indigenization Plan released in 2008, which covered the period from 2008 to 2022⁴. The document is aimed at enabling local Indian industries to develop state of the art technologies for the Indian Navy for a period of 15 years. It was crafted to make formulation in the Indian Navy requirements to monitor in listing out the equipment that could be taken up for the indigenization in the foreseeable future. It is also synergizing indigenous industries with the Navy and stimulating other sectors to make their participation in local manufacturing of weapons, higher-end technologies, sensors embarking a path to make the country self-reliant in the naval race.

A. Indian Navy Historical Background and Theoretical Framework

Since its inception, India preferred to put its energies in increasing the strength of its ground forces, all thanks to its perpetual obsession with countering Pakistan and other neighboring states on ground. India Embroiled with Pakistan in a number of skirmishes and a bitter experience of its ground forces with China in 1962 added to its perceived vitality of the Army and thereby the future of its navy was put on the back burner. It was only around the 1980's that the Indian policy makers began to realize the role of Naval forces in the state power and the idea of a strong navy finally found a niche in the consciousness of India's defense establishment. With the dawn of the 21st century, the Indian naval thought resulted in the promulgation of first ever Indian Maritime Doctrine in 2004⁵.

It was the first step towards realizing the dire need of navy's application across the spectrum of conflict and peace, more importantly as a force whose primary duty was to safeguard the interests of a growing Indian economic outreach. Following the doctrine, The National Maritime Foundation (a navy supported non-governmental think tank) was established in 2005 to work in close proximity with the Navy and provide it with the insight of constantly changing dynamics. The formation of the Naval History Division in naval headquarter, the Directorate of Strategy Concepts Transformation, the Flag Officer Doctrines & Concepts in

Mumbai played a catalyst role in institutional continuum expected to be promoting instructive and persuasive debate as far as the discussion on maritime issues were concerned⁶.

The Modi regime kicked off with aggressive military posture. However, the size of the Indian Navy had been failing to match with its humongous ambitions. The Modi regime enunciated plans for indigenization but faces chronic problems of low production and poor organization and management due to a complex structure of bureaucracy. This has slowed down the construction time of the main naval ships for the Indian Navy. Indian Navy is a force that is least spent on and faces serious budgetary challenges compared to its ambitions. However, the introduction of a white paper in 2019 on Indian Maritime Security and Strategic perspective was attributed to crafting pragmatic approach towards maritime security. The April 2019 Naval Commanders conference also revealed that Indian Navy had been executing mammoth project in a bid to stimulate its operational capability by inducting new air-crafts, submarines and warships besides enhancing its clout in the strategic maritime zones⁷. On the other hand, Indian Navy planned the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (MC PP) targeting a force level of about 200 warships by 2017⁸.

While looking at the shift in the maritime affairs of India, it is pertinent to mention Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, a prominent American strategist of the 19th century. He was a US Navy Officer, Geostrategist, and a Naval Historian. His book '*The Influence of Sea Power upon History*' earned world-wide recognition⁹. His concepts are still relevant and contribute to the modern thinking of the prominent navies of the world.

Mahan's strategy suggests that sea power is based on three pillars; production; merchant and naval shipping; and overseas markets & bases. Mahan believes in overpowering the sea through increasing the number of warships and expanding the markets through maritime routes. This is the way to drive away and deter the enemy. He believed in the encirclement and counter blockade strategy to limit the enemy to its own territory. This is the way to make the enemies to surrender without even fighting. For strategists, that is the real victory. Whatsoever, Mahan believed that maximizing naval power is important to deter or defeat a pre-eminent naval power and to gain dominance¹⁰.

The Indian Navy's strategic direction has been subjected to the narrative that it espouses the trajectory perpetuated by the Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan. Its navy started gaining importance quite earlier specifically after the Mumbai terrorist attacks. It was then that the focus shifted towards the

naval aspect and resulted in improving naval defense and offensive capabilities.

However under the Modi regime, this development boosted manifolds. India went on to acquiring technological sophistication in developing new classes of submarines, warships, aircraft carrier. Aircraft carrier plays an important role for a state in maintaining a significant geopolitical importance. There have been growing speculations from valid sources that India is confident about the development of the third aircraft carrier. It is put forward that India is supposed to have three aircraft carriers to ensure that there are always at least two in fully operational condition.

India is further shaking hands with US, France, Russia and other important countries in terms of technological and weapons acquisitions and joint ventures to achieve operational level synchronization. New Delhi has participated in different important exercises like MALABAR-21, SLINEX, VARUNA, IMCOR etc.¹¹

This Indian Naval transformation and a shift in its policies suggest that the approach is quite well knitted with the ideas of Thayer Mahan. The model that US have been implementing in the Asia Pacific shaped the environment of the region such military power maximization for the belligerent states have become a necessity. When India was welcomed in the region, the expectations were quite high. India accepted the changing geopolitical dynamics and put forward a maritime strategy in 2015. As the years passed, India came up stronger and progressed remarkably by achieving its objectives.

At current juncture India tries to play the leadership role regionally. It is quite obvious that India is going to play this role showcasing its Naval-strength. Through alliances, India is now increasingly deepening its influence into the East Asian region. With such level of naval capability, India is going to exercise an important role in the security domain of the region. It will also contribute in the safety and security of the Indian trade and other maritime activities.

B. Chinese Factor and Modernization of Indian Navy

To understand the concept of Indian Navy transformation, it is important to understand factors conceived to be driving force behind this navy modernization. Through the course of history, it is evident that Pakistan and China have been specific threat to India. Although Pakistan has always carried an Indian centric approach, yet India had to opt for Chinese centric approach. In the post 1961 era, India had to work on in military capabilities to withstand a potential misadventure by the Chinese side. India now is

considered in the Asia Pacific region as a new comer yet an important strategic player. Currently, India is likely to confront China from the waters. Earlier, India did a lot with regard to the modernization in its Army and Air Force. Now India has shaken hands with US under its Act East Policy. Resultantly, India has to shift its focus to the Navy as it has to keep up with the world class navies with the aim of countering China.

Ostensibly, China has increasing interests in IOR putting India in hot water. In one of his controversial statements, the outgoing Indian Naval Chief Admiral Suresh Mehta stated that New Delhi lacked the capacity nor did it have contemplation to be matched with Beijing in military power. While the statement may have struck the Indian administrative class, it was only manifesting the ground reality given the fact that China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is believed to have been more than thrice that of India and Indian defense expenditures constitute less than half of China¹². The states of affairs have forced India to gauge the urgency to invest in its naval capabilities.

It is important to understand that the modernization in the Indian Navy is in terms of quantity and quality. With the budget limitations yet hegemonic aims, India had to opt for a clever approach that it adopted successfully. Acquiring technological sophistication has been an important element. Modi regime is seemed to be well aware of the need of time and has considered bilateral agreements with US like the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) that would help boost its naval development.

By achieving this sophistication in technology, India Navy would perform better in the Asia Pacific, enabling to cover longer distances. The warships are now equipped with much better sensors and long range missile systems possessing system connected through Data-Link. The new submarines are equipped with advanced anti-ship missiles and Air Independent Propulsion System¹³. The Indian shipyards could be observed busy with the construction of aircraft carrier, destroyers, corvettes, frigates and submarines. The Indian officials have put forward the statements signaling towards making nuclear powered submarines in place of another aircraft carrier¹⁴. A specific trend in the Indian Navy can be observed that there is a sudden shift in the development of Indian Navy infrastructure and in the policy. The basic reasons entails China's factor, however the Eastern centric approach is more relevant behind such modernization.

Since the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to the office on 26 May 2014, India has begun investing in anti-submarine capabilities, such as

acquiring the Kamorta-class corvette, long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft like the Boeing P-8 Poseidon, Saryu-class patrol vessels, unmanned aerial vehicles, and the IAI Heron-1, has been a priority. However, the limited strength of the submarine fleet has somewhat curtailed overall operational effectiveness¹⁵. In the wake of Chinese intrusions into Ladakh in 2020, it has been announced by Indian officials that the Indian Navy has outlined intentions to enhance military infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the east and Lakshadweep in the west. This plan is aimed at establishing a comprehensive network of island airbases in both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. This infrastructure will ensure the freedom of navigation and defense of all Indian¹⁶. Indian Navy also participated enthusiastically in the Malabar war games of 2021 and in a high-intensity exercise, the Indian Navy demonstrated its prowess with coordinated maneuvers involving various vessels and aircraft. On January 11, 2022, they successfully tested the naval version of the Brahmos cruise missile, a joint project by DRDO and Russia¹⁷.

The modernization plan of the Navy vis-à-vis China includes the upgrading of capabilities of 877EKM class and HDW Shishumar class submarines. The recently acquired capabilities include Indian Air Craft Carrier (IAC) Project-71, Project 17 Shivalik Class and 17A Stealth Frigates, Project 15A Kolkata Class Stealth Destroyers commissioned in 2014 and Project 15B Guided Missiles Destroyers launched in 2015. Project 1135.6 Frigates are underway and supposed to be delivered by 2026 and Project 28 Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvettes were commissioned in August 2014. Contract for 12 Mines Counter Measure Vehicles was signed between Indian Navy and Thales Australia and they are to be delivered by 2022¹⁸.

For transportation of troops, Indian Ministry of Defense gave approval of 4 Landing Platform Docks (LPD) in July 2018. The ongoing projects include 6 INS Kalvari Scorpene Class Submarines, the first having been delivered in 2017, the second in 2019 and the remaining to be delivered by 2022. Meanwhile, The Indian Defense Acquisition Council approved the construction of 6 diesel-electric submarines in June, 2019. Moreover, the Indian Navy's air arm has state of the art Boeing P-8I Patrol and Reconnaissance aircraft and a fleet of these aircrafts have already completed more than 30000 flight hours since they were first inducted in the force¹⁹.

C. Indian Navy in Asia Pacific

The term Indo-Pacific is new in the lexicon and is taken rather as a context in terms of geopolitics and geostrategic. Officials from United States first coined the term and latter concealed its strategy behind it. Although there is

a significant US military presence in the South China Sea it cannot cover the entire Asia Pacific. From a geostrategic perspective, it was in favor of US to have extended security alliance and to get an important player into the game. Thus, a shift from Pacific to Indo-Pacific connected India to the Southeast Asian and East Asian countries pivotal for the interest of both US and India contributed to the US lead security approach in the region.

Indian Navy has joined the maritime activities in the Asia Pacific along the US, Australia, Japan. This also contributed as the basis for Indian Navy modernization. Because now India presently neither can keep up with top of the line naval fleets nor does deal with China. It, thus, was strategically beneficial for both US and India to have security partnership in the Indo-Pacific²⁰. The partnership with Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprised the US, Japan and Australia, and India further cemented India position via-a-vis China.

In this regard, Washington has helped New Delhi overwhelmingly. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) on 29 August 2016 has been proved a breakthrough for the relations between the two countries²¹. It also signifies how Washington supports modernization in the Indian Navy. Through this memorandum, the two states would be able to use each other's military facilities. This would enable India to have excess to the US bases across the regions. These regions include the Pacific Command (PACOM) now being called Indo-Pacific Command that is mainly East Asia, to the US bases in Djibouti which would let Indian Navy maintain its presence in the Gulf of Aden.

Bilateral agreements between US and India are not limited to LEMOA only. Two other agreements of a similar nature have been signed. These include like the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA). The cooperation encompasses the subjects of co-production of advanced defense articles, joint research on advanced jet engines and aircraft carrier technologies, and strategic cooperation on maritime security.

India has gained access in the Asia Pacific region. The theatre has opened the door of several new opportunities. The months long deployment of naval task force in the region provided India the opportunity to collaborate with the navies of regional countries under the Act East policy unleashed by Narendra Modi. Along the way, these naval frigates were set to take part in the bilateral exercises with the Navies of Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia. India took part in Singapore India Maritime

Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) and also the MALABAR-21 in the Western Pacific²².

India has never been able to establish primacy and hegemony in the South Asia because of China and Pakistan. This new Indo-Pacific framework enables India to have a leadership role in the immediate neighborhood and beyond. This would let India to achieve sophisticated technology from the US and extend the scope and activities of its navy. This approach also enables India to deal with China in a collective manner along with major powers of the world. It also opened the possibilities for India to enter a new region where it can extend its trade, cooperation, security etc.

D. Implications for Pakistan

Indian Navy's aggressive doctrinal shift has affected the deterrence stability in the region. The China centric approach has taken India to a whole new road to military modernization. It has paved the way for India to shake hands with the US in achieving long range air defense systems and to acquire technological sophistication²³. It has given Indian Navy a chance to extend its operational capabilities through joint ventures in the Asia Pacific. On the other hand, Pakistan's approach has always been India centric throughout the history. There is no denying of the fact that Islamabad has achieved immensely military technology from China. Yet the budget restraints have incurred specific restraints to maximizing military potential and achieving nuclear triad.

At present, it is hard to make this claim that the conventional asymmetry has gone that far but the same cannot be expected for the future. Although the naval comparison of both countries still suggests the domination of India yet the gap is manageable. But in future, the extent of Indian Navy modernization would definitely undermine the deterrence stability in the region²⁴. The apparent solution that Pakistan seems to have come with is relying on tactical nuclear weapons. This again is of great concern because developing and deploying tactical nuclear weapons have its own complications and complexities. Again, this step can also lead to affecting strategic stability of the region. The way some officials from Pakistan have hinted towards the way of using these tactical nuclear weapons, there rise some concerns. Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons will complicate safety and security²⁵.

Expanding tactical nuclear arsenals and infrastructure naturally heightens safety and security concerns. Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons can also create complications in terms of command, control, and communication, with the added worry that they may carry strategic consequences²⁶. Given

the proximity of borders between India and Pakistan, it is important to note that tactical nuclear weapons would no more have a limited scope. Strategic implications can provoke a strategic response.

The other option left for Pakistan is also quite difficult in terms of budget constraints and other security priorities of Pakistan. However, if Pakistan still has to match the adversary's capability, it would have to invest in long range air defense systems. Pakistan will have to focus on improving range and precision of its ballistic missiles and cruise missiles²⁷. Increasing of number of Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) should also be considered to cater to the long-range air defense systems of India.

Pakistan should consider the acquisition of nuclear powered submarines along with long range submarine launched ballistic missiles. Islamabad will have to step forward to developing and achieve new technologies that would enhance its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities²⁸. Space sector cannot be ignored in this regard. With these capabilities, Pakistan can counter any misadventure or can manage the conventional asymmetry effectively. Earlier in November 2021, China delivered its largest and most effective warship to Pakistan Navy to beef up its all-weather ally in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. Pakistan has a long standing commitment to promote Chinese interests in the region and has obtained beneficial technological, economic and military assistance in return. The strong naval cooperation between Pakistan and China has been manifested by a number of joint naval exercises, the most recent being the 'Sea Guardians' naval drills carried out in 2020.

This sphere of cooperation between the two 'Iron Brothers' is an alarming concern for India. India views this cooperation and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in particular as part of larger Chinese expansionist aims, evident from the fact that it is the only regional country that has abstained from welcoming CPEC as an economic opportunity. India is continually growing anxious of China's investment in Pakistan and from the fact that after the completion of Gwadar Port, Pakistan shall become a regional trading hub. In this capacity, to counter the Gwadar Port, India heavily invested in the Iranian Port of Chabahar. However, Iran views both Chabahar and Gwadar as supplementary to each other and has even invited China and Pakistan to partake as well.

Meanwhile, India is also trying to destabilize Balochistan by supporting separatist factions like BLF and the arrest of its spy Kulbushan Jadhav from Balochistan is a clear evidence of its involvement in terror activities within Pakistan. India is potentially looking to utilize the already existing extremist factions from Xinjiang to Gwadar including East Turkestan Islamic

Movement, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch Liberation Front against the CPEC to halt its completion process. It also operates its diplomatic channels through enunciation of complaints against China which claim that China is building its infrastructure for CPEC on disputed areas. However, it has not been successful in the diplomatic arena²⁹.

However, both China and India should come forward to nip their differences in the bud. This would be beneficial for both states as well as the region. War is not an option in a nuclearized region. Any aggressive shift in the policy or such a gap in the deterrence stability of the region can lead to unwanted results³⁰.

Conclusion

India is looking forward to flexing its muscles in the Indi-Pacific region and struggling to emerge as another competitor in this feature. Although it has a long standing stance over IOR and considers it its national backyard, it is jumping in the competition without taking into account an already existing rivalry between China and United States in the region which only indicates how the feature is already sensitive from a strategic perspective. Indian Naval ambitions in the recent times are only going to worsen the state of competition in the IOR and add to the risks related to possible direct confrontation. The least thought out factor in the Indian Naval intelligentsia is India's adjacent border with China and its freshly unpleasant experiences with China over Ladakh. It must be realized by India that challenging the Chinese influence at sea can also result in jeopardizing the security of its land borders with China.

The June 2020 Galwan Valley clashes are one instance of this sordid possibility manifesting that while India may avail some support at sea from its regional and American alliances, it would be standing alone at the land against China. Moreover, India has had a historical commitment to become a regional hegemon in the South Asian region and now it has a vital opportunity both in this region as well as in the IOR to play an effective role as an intermediary medium between major powers. India could also choose to take a legal path for compelling China to observe the freedom of navigation. Instead, New Delhi is choosing to become another belligerent in this competitive environment which is only going to exacerbate the overall strategic atmosphere.

Indian aims and activities can also give birth to new alliances and blocs in the region. With its current approach in the IOR, it can expect the formation of bloc that may include Australia, Japan, Taiwan and the United States. In response to this possibility, China may have on its side Pakistan and the

Central Asian states aiming to connect through its Belt and Road Initiative BRI. This could also tempt the Russian Federation to join hands with China and utilize the opportunity to supplement its force in the IOR and South China Sea and stand united with China against the growing American expansion in this feature. I Recent naval exercises indicate the possibility of Russia and China collaborating in the Indian Ocean, posing a more substantial challenge to the ongoing U.S. presence and influence in the region when compared to their individual capabilities.

India must realize that its strategic ambitions, both at sea and land, pose collective implications to the security of this region and needs to manifest willingness to put its aspirations behind its back and engage in table talk and confidence building measures with its neighboring states. Through peaceful settlements in South Asia, India can focus more effectively on the Asia-Pacific region. India can draw fruitful benefits out of initiatives like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The utilization of its gifted geography to approach the Far East Asian states for economic cooperation without engaging in militaristic competitions can turn out to be extremely advantageous for India. The exact opposite of this situation with India fulfilling its strategic aspirations are not only going to be disadvantageous for India but also jeopardizing the security of an already volatile region of the South Asia.

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