



Naval Modernization in South Asia: Strategic Competition between India and Pakistan

Mr Ahsan bilal

Lecturer of SISS department UOI Sargodha campus , ahsan.bilal@siss.uol.edu.pk

Muhammad Hassaan Babar

Lecturer of Criminology UOI Sargodha campus, hassan.babar@siss.uol.edu.pk

Dr Rai Muhammad Ali

Assistant professor at University of Lahore Sargodha campus,
rai.muhammad@siss.uol.edu.pk

Abstract

The modernization of the Navy has become a major aspect of strategic rivalry in South Asia and in this regard the rivalry between the India and Pakistan, both of which are nuclear armed adversaries whose hostility is taking a new dimension in the sea. Historically, South Asian strategic thought was dominated by land-based and continental issues, but it has in the last twenty years experienced a very strong change towards the seas. This is due to the fact that the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increased strategic importance, expanding maritime trade routes, energy security requirements, and extra-regional interests of the United States and China. It is against this context that both India and Pakistan have undertaken ambitious modernization efforts on its navy to achieve the purpose of increasing deterrence, securing sea line of communication, and expanding power beyond its immediate coastlines. This research paper discusses the essence, motivation, and consequence of modernizing the naval in South Asia based on the comparative evaluation of India and Pakistan naval policies and capacities, as well as the pattern of procurement. Based on qualitative research design built on the analysis of secondary data, the research uses the official naval doctrines, defense white papers, military balance reports, and academic literature to evaluate the influence of the maritime competition on security dynamics in the region. The article puts the concept of naval modernization in the context of more general theoretical approaches, such as realism, security dilemma or the theory of balance of power to clarify how new technological breakthroughs at sea might make the world a much safer place (in terms of deterrence) and, at the same time, promote more instability. The paper claims that the modernization of

India and Pakistan naval forces is an expression of the desire of the two countries to become the regional and aspiring global power whereas the maritime policy of Pakistan is mainly deterrence-based in the sense that it aims at counterbalancing the traditional naval advantages of India with asymmetric and sea-denial forces. The results indicate that the risk of heightening security dilemma in South Asia due to unmanaged maritime competition is a possibility that has a high likelihood of miscalculation at sea. The paper ends with an argument that confidence-building measures, maritime dialogue and regional mechanisms of cooperation should be used to deter escalation and enhance stability in the Indian Ocean Region.

Keywords: Naval modernization, South Asia, India-Pakistan rivalry, maritime security, Indian Ocean Region, strategic competition.

Introduction

Far back, South Asia has been marked by a fierce strategic competition, ancient historical animosity and a historic security dilemma, most between India and Pakistan. Both states have waged several wars, had continuous military confrontations, and produced nuclear weapons since 1947 after gaining independence and thus their relation is one of most volatile ones in the international system. Historically, such rivalry has been characterized by a land-based interest especially, in the matters of territory as well as borders and internal security. But over the last few decades, the South Asian strategic environment has been changing dramatically with the increase in the importance of the maritime sphere.

The Indian Ocean Region has become a focus of geopolitical rivalry as it links key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through which the world trades, ships energy, and moves military forces. Almost two-thirds of oil exportation in the world as well as a significant part of international trade pass through the Indian Ocean, which highlights the strategic significance of the latter (Till, 2018). Maritime security to the South Asian states especially India and Pakistan has been intertwined with national security. This change has led the two nations to invest a lot of money in modernisation of the navies, building of fleets, acquiring of sophisticated platforms and reworking of maritime doctrines.

South Asian modernisation of navies is not being done in a vacuum. It is firmly rooted in the larger regional and global processes, such as the increasing influence of China in the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Pacific policy of the United States, and changing trends of alliance and partnership. The growing naval potentials in India demonstrate its intentions of becoming a net security provider in the Indian Ocean as well as countering the maritime influence of China. However, according to Pakistan, the country is asymmetric in economic and military capabilities which makes it act as a maritime state with an emphasis on deterrence, sea denial, and strategic alliances especially with China.

1.2 Significance of Naval Modernization in South Asia

Naval modernization is not just a technological update of the naval forces but it is a complete change of thinking in terms of strategy and threats. In the case of India, the navy is now an

important power projection tool, maritime diplomacy, and protection of its economic interests way beyond its immediate surroundings. The strategic vision of the Indian Navy expansion into the aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and blue-water capabilities is another sign of the vision stretching into the Western Pacific as well as the Arabian sea.

Pakistan, on the other hand, is motivated more by its naval modernization by the necessity to have a credible deterrence against a convenience superior opponent. The Pak Navy has given attention to improve capabilities of its submarines, strike capabilities of its surface combatants, and to give it a capability of striking targets at sea, which complicates the Indian naval planning. This unbalanced strategy aims at compensating the quantitative disadvantages by increasing the cost of war to India, especially at sea.

The Indian and Pakistani maritime rivalry has deeper implications to the stability of the region. Naval forces are used in an environment where there is ambiguity, escalation may occur swiftly, and there is a lack of crisis management. Sea incidents, misunderstanding of naval maneuvers, an accident in technology of submarines or nuclear-capable platforms may cause an unwanted escalation. In this regard, the drivers and ramifications of naval modernization need to be known in order to evaluate future trends of security in South Asia.

Research Problem and Objectives.

Even though the significance of maritime security in South Asia is increasingly important nowadays, much of the current literature can still be considered as land-based conflicts and nuclear deterrence. Relatively less systematic analysis has been given to naval modernization especially within the backdrop of India-Pakistan rivalry. This paper intends to fill this gap by looking at the role of naval modernization in strategic competition between India and Pakistan and what this competition entails to the stability of the region.

This study has the following main goals:

- To examine the motivation of naval modernization in India and Pakistan.
- To discuss the essence and dimensions of the development of naval capability in the two nations.
- To compare Indian and Pakistan navy strategies with the strategic competition.
- To evaluate the maritime competition implications on the region security and stability in South Asia.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. What are the strategic, political, and economic developments that contribute to naval modernization in India and Pakistan?
2. What are the differences between the modernization programs of the Indian and Pakistani navies when it comes to their intended purpose, capabilities and doctrines?
3. How does naval modernization aggravate or alleviate the security dilemma in South Asian?
4. What are the regional and overall global ramifications of the India-Pakistan sea contest?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research paper will be confined to the modernization trends in Indo-Pakistan Navy with special reference to the post 2000 period where the competition in the sea has been on the rise. Although the paper recognizes the role played by the extra-regional powers including China and the United States, it does not give a comprehensive discussion on their navy policies. Rather, it looks at their functions as far as they influence the India-Pakistan maritime processes.

The work is based on the secondary sources, such as official documents, scholarly sources, and defense reports as the main ones. Although this is an effective method, it is limited by the accessibility and quality of data that is publicly available, especially sensitive military projects.

Structure of the Article

The article is structured into a number of sections. The second section is the full literature review concerning the subject of maritime security, naval modernization, and strategic competition in South Asia. The third section describes the theoretical framework and the research methodology that was used in the study. The naval modernization projects of India and Pakistan are then examined in detail later sections and a comparison and evaluation of their strategic impacts is drawn. The last parts cover regional and global impacts, provide policy suggestions and finally give thoughts about future maritime security in South Asia.

Naval modernization is not just a technological update of the naval forces but it is a complete change of thinking in terms of strategy and threats. In the case of India, the navy is now an important power projection tool, maritime diplomacy, and protection of its economic interests way beyond its immediate surroundings. The strategic vision of the Indian Navy expansion into the aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and blue-water capabilities is another sign of the vision stretching into the Western Pacific as well as the Arabian sea.

Pakistan, on the other hand, is motivated more by its naval modernization by the necessity to have a credible deterrence against a convenience superior opponent. The Pak Navy has given attention to improve capabilities of its submarines, strike capabilities of its surface combatants, and to give it a capability of striking targets at sea, which complicates the Indian naval planning. This unbalanced strategy aims at compensating the quantitative disadvantages by increasing the cost of war to India, especially at sea.

The Indian and Pakistani maritime rivalry has deeper implications to the stability of the region. Naval forces are used in an environment where there is ambiguity, escalation may occur swiftly, and there is a lack of crisis management. Sea incidents, misunderstanding of naval maneuvers, an accident in technology of submarines or nuclear-capable platforms may cause an unwanted escalation. In this regard, the drivers and ramifications of naval modernization need to be known in order to evaluate future trends of security in South Asia.

Research Problem and Objectives.

Even though the significance of maritime security in South Asia is increasingly important nowadays, much of the current literature can still be considered as land-based conflicts and

nuclear deterrence. Relatively less systematic analysis has been given to naval modernization especially within the backdrop of India-Pakistan rivalry. This paper intends to fill this gap by looking at the role of naval modernization in strategic competition between India and Pakistan and what this competition entails to the stability of the region.

This study has the following main goals:

- To examine the motivation of naval modernization in India and Pakistan.
- To discuss the essence and dimensions of the development of naval capability in the two nations.
- To compare Indian and Pakistan navy strategies with the strategic competition.
- To evaluate the maritime competition implications on the region security and stability in South Asia.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research paper will be confined to the modernization trends in Indo-Pakistan Navy with special reference to the post 2000 period where the competition in the sea has been on the rise. Although the paper recognizes the role played by the extra-regional powers including China and the United States, it does not give a comprehensive discussion on their navy policies. Rather, it looks at their functions as far as they influence the India-Pakistan maritime processes.

The work is based on the secondary sources, such as official documents, scholarly sources, and defense reports as the main ones. Although this is an effective method, it is limited by the accessibility and quality of data that is publicly available, especially sensitive military projects.

Structure of the Article

The article is structured into a number of sections. The second section is the full literature review concerning the subject of maritime security, naval modernization, and strategic competition in South Asia. The third section describes the theoretical framework and the research methodology that was used in the study. The naval modernization projects of India and Pakistan are then examined in detail later sections and a comparison and evaluation of their strategic impacts is drawn. The last parts cover regional and global impacts, provide policy suggestions and finally give thoughts about future maritime security in South Asia.

This is because security in the sea had always been shrouded by land security issues, especially border disputes and civil in fighting in South Asia. But the long coastline, the vital sea routes, and the increasing reliance on maritime commerce of the region have steadily increased the sector of a naval power. Researchers like Brewster (2014) suggest that the Indian Ocean has turned into a core area of contention in the region with the South Asia states increasingly understanding the strategic importance of maritime dominance.

According to the literature, a number of non-traditional maritime security challenges have been encountered in south Asia which include piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing and smuggling of terrorism. The 2008 attacks in Mumbai highlighted the susceptibility of the coastlines and triggered a new interest in maritime surveillance and domain awareness

(Mukherjee, 2017). These problems have strengthened the position that modernization of the navy plays a traditional military and also non-traditional security roles.

Regardless of these trends, the level of maritime collaboration between the region is minimal. The institutional frameworks like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) have been unable to bring about any form of meaningful security cooperation, mainly because of geopolitical competition in the region as well as power asymmetries. Consequently, South Asian naval modernization is more likely to support competitive, than cooperative, relationships.

Naval Modernization in the Indian Literature

The modernization of Indian navy has been studied widely on the background of India, as an emerging regional power and a potential global power. According to scholars, the Indian strategy towards the sea marks a transition not only to coastal defense but also to the blue-water ambitions which are caused by the growth of economy, energy security requirements as well as the wish to become a great power (Pant, 2016).

The focus of the Indian Navy on the aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and long-range maritime surveillance is often translated into the attempt to establish influence in the Indian Ocean and the further. According to Kaplan (2010), the maritime strategy of India is part of its overall search to attain strategic independence and domination in the region. On the same note, as Scott (2018) claims, the Indian perceives the power of the navy as a tool that can counter the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, there is a warning that the naval power of India should not be overestimated. Modernization is still limited due to budgetary limitations, procurement delays, and technological setbacks (Brewster, 2019). Additionally, the critics cite the argument that the growing naval presence of India is likely to increase the security concerns in the region especially in Pakistan thus escalating the security dilemma.

Modernization and the Strategy of the Pakistani Navy

In comparison to India, the modernization of Pakistan Navy has not received much scholarly coverage. The maritime strategy of Pakistan is sometimes characterized as a defensive and deterrence-based one where it is discussed. The concerned scholars underline that the limited economic assets and reduced industrial power of Pakistan require an asymmetric strategy of naval rivalry (Khan, 2012).

Due to its emphasis on submarine weaponry, anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD), and maritime strike weapon, much of what Pakistan is doing is being viewed as an attempt to counter the quantitative and qualitative advantages of India. The literature emphasizes how strategic alliances with China and, in particular, the role of strategic alliances in enabling the modernization of Pakistan Navy (Small, 2015). The acquisition of the Gwadar Port and its incorporation in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has made the maritime aspect of the Pakistan strategic calculus even higher.

Some analysts believe that the nuclear-capability of the deterrence-based nuclear policy of Pakistan is stabilizing, as they implement the advanced submarines and cruise missiles, but

others do not agree, and the initiative can be seen as a way to escalate and provoke the emergence of accidental conflict (Narang and Sagan, 2018).

Extra-Regional Power role

Another theme that is common in South Asian maritime security is involvement of extra-regional powers. The building up of the naval presence in the Indian Ocean by China, which is being called as a string of pearl strategy, has created a lot of debate. Although the presence depicts an economic and the presence of a defensive defensive strategy, by scholars in China, Indian analysts often view it as a strategic dilemma (Brewster, 2017).

The Indo-Pacific approach of the United States has only complicated the situation in the region by enhancing the maritime alliances of India with programs like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). According to scholars, these alignments have an indirect impact on India-Pakistan naval rivalry due to emboldening India and strengthening its dependence on China (Tellis, 2020).

Literature Gap

Although the literature on maritime security and naval modernisation has been on the increasing, some gaps are also apparent. To begin with, most of the available literature looks at India and Pakistan separately as opposed to a long-term comparative study of their naval policies, which take place within the same strategic framework. Second, there is a scarcity of combining the theoretical views with the empirical analysis, especially on the security dilemma and the process of escalation in the sea.

Third, although the place of extra-regional powers is often recognized, there is understudy of their indirect influence in the competition between India and Pakistan in the sea. Lastly, it can be seen that there are no policy-based studies that relate the trends in the modernization of the navy to confidence building and crisis management systems.

This paper aims to fill these gaps by offering to comparatively analyze the modernization of the navy as a regionally important aspect of strategic competition between India and Pakistan and its effect on regional stability in the context of a theoretically informed study. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Introduction

This section outlines the theoretical foundations and methodological approach employed to analyze naval modernization in South Asia, with specific focus on the strategic competition between India and Pakistan. Given the complexity of maritime security dynamics and the historical rivalry between the two states, the study adopts a multi-theoretical lens combined with a qualitative research design. The integration of theory and method allows for a systematic examination of how naval modernization influences strategic behavior, threat perception, and regional stability in South Asia.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily from **realist and neo-realist traditions in International Relations**, complemented by concepts from **security dilemma theory, balance of power, and maritime strategic thought**. These frameworks are

particularly suited for analyzing military competition in an anarchic international system where trust is limited and security concerns dominate state behavior.

Realism and Neo-Realism

According to realism, states are supreme actors in international politics and that their actions are pursuant to the protection, existence, and influence in an anarchical system (Waltz, 1979). In this perception, military potentials especially the naval power are the main tools and means by which states would defend their interests and thwart enemies.

Neo-realism or structural realism, goes an additional step, to point out the allocation of capabilities in the international system as the most significant determinant of state conduct. When applied to the case of South Asia, neo-realism can explain why India, the comparatively stronger state, wants to increase its naval capabilities, whereas Pakistan, being structurally disadvantaged, follows the options oriented to balance the advantage of India, without necessarily matching it.

The realist approach to naval modernization is a logical reaction to the perceived menace and the change of power. The desire of India to develop blue-water capabilities and the attention of Pakistan to sea-denial strategies show that these two countries are positioned differently in the regional power structure.

Maritime Domain Security Dilemma

Security dilemma as Jervis (1978) explains is the condition whereby actions undertaken by one state to enhance its security unwillingly endanger other states, which in turn make countermeasures that eventually decrease the security of all states. Such a dilemma is especially sharp on the sea since there is not much transparency, and the situation can rapidly escalate, as well as the dual-use technologies.

The modernization of the Indian Navy worsens the security dilemma in the Indian-Pakistan relations in a number of ways. Purchase of sophisticated submarines, long range missiles and surveillance equipments can be seen as defensive by a given state, yet offensive by the other. These dynamics are enhanced by the maritime domain as the movements of the navies are not always visible, and, consequently, prone to miscalculation.

This paper uses the security dilemma theory to examine the interactions of the modernization of the Indian and the Pakistani naval systems that may create a series of action and reaction, which leads to instability in this area.

Balance of Power and Deterrence Theory

According to balance of power theory, states are interested in ensuring that no state dominates by balancing their capabilities or by joining alliances with other states (Morgenthau, 1948). The indigenous capability and strategic relationships with extra-regional powers are both significant factors that define the balance of power in the South Asian region.

Another theory that offers more insight to maritime competition is the deterrence theory especially during the nuclear era. Nuclear submarines are considered to be a widely recognized tool of improving second-strike capability and subsequent strategic stability by

virtue of their seafloor position (Acton, 2015). But in the India-Pakistan scenario, there is the potential of additional risks that come about due to the introduction of nuclear and conventional capabilities in the sea, particularly in times of crisis when it is not clear who fired, and the motive behind anything.

It is based on the balance of power theory and the deterrence theory to evaluate whether modernization in South Asian naval can be more of a stabilizing factor based on deterrence or rather destabilizing based on arms competition.

Maritime Strategic Thought

Early maritime theorists like Mahan (1890) and Corbett (1911) offer some groundbreaking concepts on how sea power is used in the national strategy. The focus on command of the sea that Mahan has put forward is consistent with the Indian drive to achieve blue-water capability whereas Corbett theory of sea denial fits well in the asymmetric approach of the Pakistani Navy.

With the help of combining these traditional views and the modern theory of strategic thought, the research places South Asian naval modernization in the context of a wider tradition of maritime thought, both in terms of continuity and change in naval strategy.

Regional Stability Implications

The modernization of the Pakistani naval forces has ambivalent effects on the stability in the region. On the one hand, an increase in sea-denial capabilities can contribute to more serious deterrence by increasing the cost of the conflict and deterring aggression. Conversely, introduction of high-technology submarines and sea-based strike systems can increase the security dilemma especially when it is perceived to reduce the escalation point.

These dangers are increased by the absence of strong measures of maritime confidence-building between India and Pakistan. Cases at the sea, misunderstanding of naval drills or technological mishaps may blow out of proportions without the good communication channels.

Summary

The modernization of the Pakistani Navy is a strategic adaptation in the asymmetric and limited conditions. Focusing on deterrence, sea denial and strategic partnerships, Pakistan is trying to keep the maritime security intact and strategic balance in spite of the increasing naval dominance of India. Although this strategy can boost deterrence, it also creates new problems concerning the control of escalation and crisis stability.

The following section will give a comparative account of Indian and Pakistani naval modernization and how the opposing strategies are functioning and influencing the general security climate in South Asia.

Reference

Acton, J. M. (2015). *Escalation through entanglement: How the vulnerability of command-and-control systems raises the risks of an inadvertent nuclear war*. International Security, 43(1), 56–99. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320

-
- Brewster, D. (2014). *India's ocean: The story of India's bid for regional leadership*. Routledge.
- Brewster, D. (2017). China's expanding maritime presence in the Indian Ocean: Implications for regional security. *Asian Security*, 13(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2016.1237222>
- Brewster, D. (2019). India's naval ambitions and the Indo-Pacific. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 15(2), 123–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1605083>
- Buzan, B., & Herring, E. (1998). *The arms dynamic in world politics*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Corbett, J. S. (1911). *Some principles of maritime strategy*. Longmans, Green & Co.
- Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma. *World Politics*, 30(2), 167–214. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>
- Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American power*. Random House.
- Khan, F. H. (2012). *Eating grass: The making of the Pakistani bomb*. Stanford University Press.
- Mahan, A. T. (1890). *The influence of sea power upon history, 1660–1783*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Mukherjee, R. (2017). India's maritime strategy and regional security. *Strategic Analysis*, 41(3), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2017.1314215>
- Narang, V., & Sagan, S. D. (2018). Sea-based nuclear weapons and strategic stability. *International Security*, 43(2), 7–44. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00327
- Pant, H. V. (2016). India's maritime strategy and the Indo-Pacific. *Asia Policy*, 21, 1–10.
- Scott, D. (2018). India and the Indian Ocean: From regional to global power projection. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 14(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2018.1421380>
- Small, A. (2015). *The China–Pakistan axis: Asia's new geopolitics*. Oxford University Press.
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2023). *SIPRI yearbook: Armaments, disarmament and international security*. SIPRI.
- Tangredi, S. J. (2002). *Globalization and maritime power*. Institute for National Strategic Studies.
- Tellis, A. J. (2020). *Troubles ahead: U.S.–India relations in the Indo-Pacific*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Till, G. (2018). *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill.