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INDIA'S NAVAL MODERNIZATION AND EVOLVING NUCLEAR POSTURE: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIAN STABILITY

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Abstract

India's strategic trajectory since 2014 reflects a deliberate convergence of naval modernization and nuclear posture, reshaping the security environment of South Asia. The expansion of aircraft carrier groups, nuclear-powered submarines, and sea-based ballistic missile systems illustrates India's determination to transform into a blue-water power with assured second-strike capability. Simultaneously, debates over the credibility of its "No First Use" pledge and a discernible shift toward counterforce tendencies highlight the doctrinal recalibration underpinning its evolving nuclear policy. Together, these parallel developments constitute a maritime–nuclear nexus that strengthens India's deterrence credibility while exacerbating regional insecurities. This article examines the interconnected dimensions of India's naval modernization and nuclear posture, focusing on their implications for Pakistan's deterrence calculus, regional arms race dynamics, and the risks of crisis instability in the Indian Ocean. It argues that while sea-based deterrence enhances survivability and theoretically contributes to stability, it simultaneously introduces command-and-control vulnerabilities, heightens the possibility of inadvertent escalation, and accelerates an action–reaction cycle in South Asia. Pakistan's asymmetric responses, including submarine-launched cruise missiles and Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategies, underscore the competitive spiral unleashed by India's dual-track modernization. The paper concludes that India's naval–nuclear trajectory presents a dual-edged reality: it strengthens New Delhi's power projection in the Indo-Pacific while undermining deterrence stability in South Asia. To mitigate destabilizing outcomes, the study recommends asymmetric adaptation for Pakistan, confidence-building and nuclear risk-reduction measures, and the establishment of regional maritime security frameworks. Without such mechanisms, the Indian Ocean risks becoming a flashpoint of instability rather than a stabilizing pillar of the Asian security order.

Keywords: India; Naval Modernization; Nuclear Posture; South Asia; Deterrence Stability; Pakistan; Indian Ocean; Sea-based Deterrence; Arms Race; Indo-Pacific Strategy

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1. INTRODUCTION

India's contemporary strategic orientation has undergone a marked transformation in the post-2014 era, reflecting a departure from its traditional strategic restraint toward a more assertive pursuit of military modernization and power projection. Under the premiership of Narendra Modi, New Delhi has adopted a recalibrated defense policy that places emphasis not only on continental security concerns but also on the maritime domain, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific (Pant & Joshi, 2017). This shift corresponds with India's ambition to emerge as a leading power capable of shaping regional security dynamics, projecting influence beyond its immediate neighborhood, and maintaining credible deterrence against both regional adversaries and extra-regional powers (Mohan, 2018). The post-2014 trajectory underscores a growing synergy between conventional force enhancement and nuclear doctrinal evolution, situating India's defense posture at the intersection of strategic modernization and great-power competition.

Naval power and nuclear doctrine together constitute the cornerstone of India's evolving defense calculus. India's naval modernization—exemplified by the induction of aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and long-range maritime surveillance systems—has reinforced its aspirations for blue-water naval capability and extended deterrence (Kumar, 2020). At the same time, the development of sea-based nuclear assets, such as the *Arihant*-class submarines armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), reflects India's determination to ensure a survivable second-strike capability (Tellis, 2016). Parallel to these technological and operational advancements, New Delhi's nuclear doctrine has exhibited notable fluidity, particularly regarding the credibility of its "No First Use" pledge and the perceived shift toward preemptive counterforce strategies (Narang, 2017). The integration of naval modernization with nuclear doctrinal adjustments thus represents a strategic convergence that expands India's power projection capacity while simultaneously complicating regional deterrence stability.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to interrogate the nexus between India's naval modernization and its evolving nuclear posture in shaping the contours of South Asian security. The guiding research question is as follows: *How does India's naval modernization, in conjunction with its evolving nuclear posture, reshape South Asian stability?* By situating the inquiry within broader debates on deterrence, escalation dynamics, and regional strategic competition, this paper contends that the maritime-nuclear convergence in India's defense policy constitutes a pivotal variable in assessing the future trajectory of South Asian stability.

1.1 Research Question

i. To what extent does India's naval modernization—particularly the development of nuclear-powered submarines and sea-based deterrence capabilities—enhance its power projection and reshape the maritime balance in the Indian Ocean?

ii. How are India's doctrinal shifts, including debates over its "No First Use" pledge and movement toward counterforce capabilities, transforming the credibility and stability of its nuclear posture in South Asia?

iii. In what ways does the convergence of India's naval modernization and evolving nuclear doctrine affect Pakistan's deterrence calculus, and what implications does this hold for crisis escalation and long-term strategic stability in the region?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs two theoretical lenses to analyze the intersection of India's naval modernization and evolving nuclear posture: **Realism, particularly the security**

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dilemma, and **Deterrence Theory, including the stability–instability paradox**. These frameworks provide the analytical foundation to understand the dynamics of competition, threat perception, and crisis instability in South Asia.

i. Realism and the Security Dilemma

Realism underscores the centrality of power and survival in an anarchic international order (Morgenthau, 1948). India's pursuit of naval modernization—through aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and sea-based deterrence—reflects a classic Realist strategy of augmenting military capabilities to secure its interests and assert regional influence. However, as Herz (1950) and Jervis (1978) argue, the **security dilemma** ensures that such moves, even if defensive in intent, are perceived as threatening by adversaries. Pakistan interprets India's naval expansion and nuclear doctrinal shifts as aggressive, prompting countermeasures in the form of asymmetric strategies and investment in sea-denial capabilities. Thus, the logic of the security dilemma explains why India's military modernization exacerbates strategic competition rather than generating stability in South Asia.

ii. Deterrence Theory and the Stability–Instability Paradox

Deterrence Theory, particularly as articulated by Schelling (1966) and Snyder (1961), emphasizes the role of credible threats in preventing adversary aggression. India's shift toward sea-based nuclear deterrence—through the Arihant-class submarines and SLBM development—aims to strengthen second-strike survivability and reinforce strategic stability. Yet, debates surrounding India's nuclear doctrine, including the erosion of its No First Use commitment, inject ambiguity and risk into deterrence dynamics (Perkovich, 2001; Narang, 2013). As Jervis (1984) explains through the **stability–instability paradox**, greater stability at the strategic nuclear level may embolden states to engage in lower-level conflicts, assuming escalation can be controlled. In the South Asian context, India's strengthened deterrent could paradoxically increase the risks of limited war or crisis escalation in the Indian Ocean, undermining the very stability it seeks to ensure.

iii. Synthesis

Together, Realism and Deterrence Theory capture the dual logic shaping South Asian security. Realism explains the **action–reaction cycle** of naval and nuclear modernization under an anarchic order, while Deterrence Theory highlights the **fragile balance between stability and instability** under evolving nuclear doctrines. Applied jointly, these theories demonstrate that India's naval modernization and nuclear posture are not isolated defense measures but interconnected strategic choices that reshape the balance of power and generate profound implications for regional stability.

2. INDIA'S NAVAL MODERNIZATION

India's naval modernization constitutes a deliberate and multi-dimensional effort to convert maritime ambition into operational capability. Over the last decade New Delhi has pursued a synchronized expansion of platforms (surface combatants and carriers), undersea forces (conventional diesel-electric and nuclear-propelled submarines), and force-multipliers (maritime patrol aircraft, UAVs, and integrated C4ISR), explicitly aimed at attaining credible blue-water reach and a survivable maritime nuclear deterrent. This program is simultaneously technological (indigenisation of shipbuilding and reactors), doctrinal (greater emphasis on sea-based deterrence and expeditionary operations), and geopolitical (linkage to Indo-Pacific strategy and partner-building). The strategic logic underpinning this transformation is twofold: to secure sea lines of communication that

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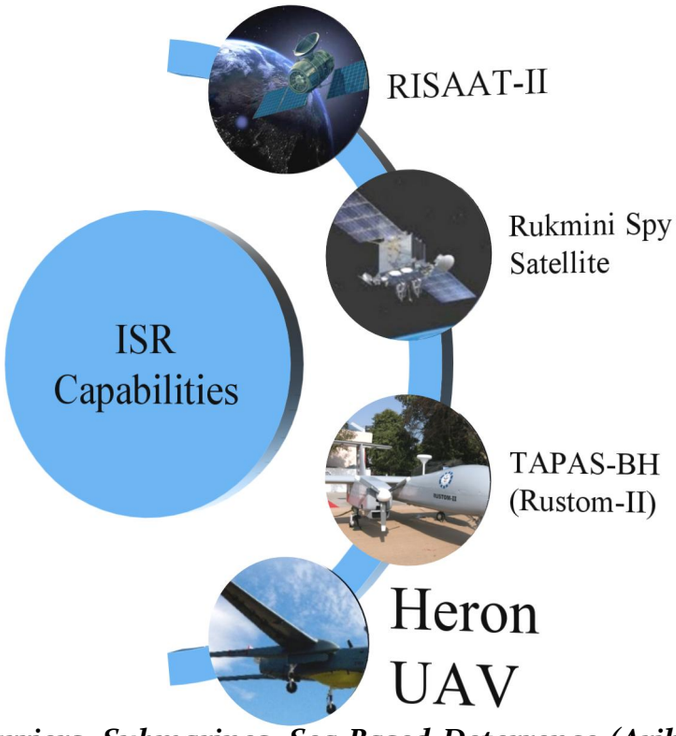
sustain India's economy and to construct layered deterrence that extends from littoral denial to assured second-strike at sea.



2.1 Aircraft Carriers, Submarines, Sea-Based Deterrence (Arihant-Class, Future SSBN Fleet)

The Indian Navy's investment in carrier strike groups, particularly the commissioning of the indigenously built INS *Vikrant* and plans for a larger carrier under the IAC-II project, demonstrates New Delhi's long-term intent to dominate the Indian Ocean and project power beyond its immediate maritime neighborhood (Kumar, 2020). Parallel to surface capabilities, the Arihant-class SSBNs have emerged as the cornerstone of India's sea-based nuclear deterrent, with the *Arihant* already operational and subsequent units such as the *Arighat* and S4-class expected to expand survivability and nuclear payload capacity (NTI, 2025). These developments underscore India's determination to complete its nuclear triad and reinforce its second-strike capability against both regional and extra-regional adversaries (Tellis, 2016).

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Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

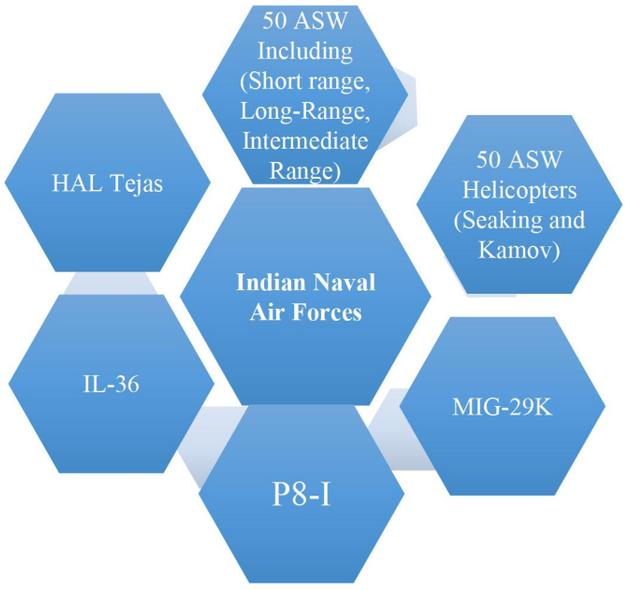

FIGURE 1: INDIAN NAVAL FORCES

Moreover, New Delhi has approved the construction of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), which would provide crucial escort roles for SSBNs and enhance sea-denial capabilities in contested waters (Reuters, 2024). The progressive integration of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), particularly the K-4 and K-5 systems, further elevates India's sea-based deterrence credibility by extending strike ranges deep into adversary territory (Army Recognition, 2025). Such advances not only cement India's nuclear survivability but also complicate adversarial counterforce strategies by dispersing deterrent assets across the maritime domain (Narang, 2017).

FIGURE 2 STEALTH FRIGATES- ENHANCED POWER

Stealth frigates are force multiplier to IN's. In frigates IN has commissioned frigates including (Shivalik Class, Teg Class, Kamrota Class and Talwar Class.

2.2 Blue-Water Navy Ambitions and Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's maritime strategy has shifted from a coastal defense orientation to a proactive Indo-Pacific doctrine that emphasizes power projection, coalition-building, and maritime

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domain awareness. The articulation of the "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) doctrine highlights India's attempt to assume the role of a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), while logistics-sharing agreements with the United States, France, and Australia enhance its operational reach (Mohan, 2018). Carrier battle groups, long-range P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, and enhanced amphibious capabilities are critical enablers of India's ambition to achieve sustained blue-water presence and expand its strategic influence (Kumar, 2020).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is also driven by competitive dynamics vis-à-vis China. Increasing Chinese naval deployments in the IOR, including the expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) submarine patrols, has reinforced New Delhi's sense of urgency to accelerate naval modernization (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2019). Consequently, India has pursued deeper alignment with Quad partners, investing in interoperability and maritime surveillance systems that amplify its role as a pivotal security actor. While framed as cooperative, these efforts functionally consolidate India's maritime leadership and reshape the strategic architecture of the Indo-Pacific (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

2.3 Implications for Pakistan's Maritime Security

India's naval modernization presents a complex challenge to Pakistan's maritime security, particularly in terms of nuclear deterrence and operational asymmetry. The induction of SSBNs expands India's assured retaliation capability, thereby undermining Pakistan's land-based deterrence assumptions and compelling Islamabad to account for an additional maritime leg of India's triad (Abbasi, 2024). Similarly, India's carrier strike groups enhance its ability to project power into the Arabian Sea, threatening Pakistan's sea lines of communication and maritime economic corridors, especially under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework (Jahanzaib, 2024). These developments complicate Pakistan's deterrence calculus and increase its reliance on asymmetric naval strategies, such as the development of Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) to ensure credible second-strike options (Khan, 2020).

Beyond material balance, the maritime-nuclear convergence raises risks of inadvertent escalation in a crisis. The dispersal of nuclear assets at sea amplifies command-and-control challenges and raises the likelihood of miscalculation during high-intensity confrontations (Narang, 2017). For Pakistan, this means investing in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, undersea surveillance, and crisis management frameworks to offset India's growing maritime edge. Without reciprocal confidence-building measures, the India–Pakistan action–reaction cycle in the Indian Ocean risks destabilizing regional security and introducing a new front of strategic competition (Abbasi, 2024).

3. INDIA'S NUCLEAR POSTURE: DOCTRINAL SHIFTS

India's nuclear posture has evolved considerably since the formal articulation of its nuclear doctrine in 1999, which emphasized a **credible minimum deterrent** and a **No First Use (NFU)** commitment. Over the past decade, however, the doctrine has been increasingly questioned both within India's strategic community and by external observers, as debates over NFU credibility and the possibility of adopting a **counterforce-first strike strategy** have intensified (Narang, 2017). This evolution reflects India's changing threat perceptions vis-à-vis both Pakistan and China, as well as its broader ambition to integrate nuclear signaling with its conventional and maritime modernization. The shift introduces complexity into South Asia's deterrence landscape, where stability rests heavily on clarity of doctrines and predictability of responses (Perkovich & Dalton, 2019).

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Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

3.1 Evolution of Nuclear Doctrine: NFU Debates, Preemptive Counterforce Tendencies

India's declared doctrine has long rested on NFU, whereby it pledges not to use nuclear weapons first but to retaliate with massive force in case of a nuclear attack (Government of India, 1999). However, statements by senior Indian officials since 2016 have cast doubt on the rigidity of this policy. Former Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's remarks in 2019, suggesting that NFU may not be "cast in stone," revived speculation about a doctrinal recalibration (Pant & Joshi, 2020). Scholars argue that India's pursuit of counterforce capabilities—including precision-strike systems, ballistic missile defense (BMD), and multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs)—signals a latent shift toward a more flexible, possibly preemptive nuclear strategy (Narang, 2017).

This doctrinal fluidity raises serious implications for Pakistan, which has structured its deterrence posture around India's NFU pledge. If India were to embrace a counterforce-first strike option, the risks of crisis instability would rise significantly, as Pakistan may be compelled to adopt launch-on-warning or dispersed nuclear deployments, further eroding the stability of nuclear deterrence in South Asia (Krepon & Thompson, 2013). Thus, NFU debates are not merely academic but represent a potential transformation in the operational logic of India's deterrence posture.

3.2 Sea-Based Nuclear Capabilities (SLBMs, Survivability, Second-Strike Assurance)

India's development of a **maritime nuclear deterrent** represents the most significant structural evolution in its posture. The commissioning of the *INS Arihant* in 2016, followed by the *Arighat* and future SSBNs, marks the operationalization of a survivable sea-based deterrent (NTI, 2025). These SSBNs, equipped with **K-series submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs)**, provide India with a credible second-strike capability by ensuring survivability against preemptive strikes on land-based assets (Army Recognition, 2025). This capability directly strengthens India's nuclear triad and underlines the convergence of its naval modernization and nuclear policy.

Sea-based deterrence also introduces greater operational flexibility for India. With longer-range SLBMs under development (such as the K-4 with a 3,500 km range and the K-5 projected to exceed 5,000 km), India aims to target both Pakistan and China from secure bastions within the Bay of Bengal (Tellis, 2016). However, the dispersal of nuclear assets into the maritime domain raises command-and-control complexities and necessitates a higher level of operational readiness. For Pakistan, this represents a qualitative shift in the deterrence equation, as India's nuclear survivability diminishes Islamabad's ability to neutralize India's arsenal in a disarming strike scenario (Khan, 2020).

3.3 Doctrinal Ambiguity and Risks of Escalation

India's nuclear posture today is characterized by **deliberate ambiguity**. On the one hand, official statements continue to affirm NFU and credible minimum deterrence; on the other, the acquisition of counterforce capabilities, doctrinal ambiguity, and naval nuclear expansion suggest preparation for a more flexible deterrent structure (Pant & Joshi, 2020). This ambiguity enhances deterrence against multiple adversaries but simultaneously undermines stability by increasing the risks of misperception and miscalculation in crisis scenarios (Perkovich & Dalton, 2019).

The risks of escalation are particularly acute in the maritime domain. Nuclear-armed submarines operating under conditions of restricted communication may inadvertently escalate crises if detected or targeted. Furthermore, India's ambiguous doctrine could encourage Pakistan to adopt more aggressive postures, such as early nuclear

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Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

signaling or dispersal of tactical systems, which magnify risks of inadvertent escalation (Krepon & Thompson, 2013). The combination of doctrinal ambiguity, expanding counterforce capability, and sea-based deterrence thus creates a more unpredictable and potentially unstable nuclear environment in South Asia.

4. MARITIME–NUCLEAR NEXUS

The convergence of India's naval modernization and nuclear posture reflects a deliberate effort to create a **maritime–nuclear nexus** that strengthens survivability, enhances second-strike assurance, and positions India as a credible blue-water nuclear power. This nexus is central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy, as it seeks to counter China's growing presence while maintaining strategic deterrence against Pakistan. However, while the integration of naval and nuclear capabilities provides India with enhanced flexibility, it also introduces **significant operational and escalation risks**, especially concerning command and control in the maritime domain (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

4.1 Integration of Naval Modernization with Nuclear Posture

India's naval modernization and nuclear posture are increasingly intertwined, as the expansion of its nuclear triad is being driven primarily by naval platforms. The operationalization of SSBNs (*INS Arihant*, *Arighat*, and future vessels) represents the most crucial step in linking naval modernization with nuclear deterrence (NTI, 2025). These platforms not only strengthen India's sea-denial and sea-control capabilities but also provide a secure environment for nuclear assets. Additionally, the integration of advanced surveillance, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) platforms, and carrier strike groups ensures that India's nuclear assets at sea are shielded by conventional naval forces, reflecting a deliberate doctrinal fusion of naval and nuclear strategy (Scott, 2019).

This integration also reflects India's ambition to balance China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which already fields a growing fleet of nuclear-powered submarines and ballistic missile submarines. By embedding nuclear deterrence within its naval modernization drive, India seeks to ensure both conventional and nuclear credibility in the Indo-Pacific (Sakhuja, 2020). However, this dual integration heightens Pakistan's security dilemma, as Islamabad perceives India's conventional–nuclear synergy as undermining its deterrent credibility, compelling it to diversify its own naval and missile posture.

4.3 Sea-Based Deterrence as India's Strategic Priority

India's long-term strategy places **sea-based deterrence at the core of its nuclear doctrine**. Land-based nuclear systems are increasingly vulnerable to counterforce strikes due to advancements in surveillance, missile defense, and precision-strike technologies. In contrast, SSBNs provide survivability, mobility, and assured retaliation, making them indispensable for credible deterrence (Tellis, 2016). India's investments in the K-series SLBMs, particularly the K-4 and K-5 systems with extended ranges, demonstrate a sustained commitment to sea-based deterrence as its nuclear priority (Army Recognition, 2025).

Furthermore, the Indian Ocean's geography favors survivability, as SSBNs can operate within relatively secure bastions in the Bay of Bengal, shielded by choke points and protected by Indian naval forces. This posture allows India to credibly deter both Pakistan and China, as longer-range SLBMs enable strikes without exposing submarines to forward deployment (Saran, 2019). Yet, while sea-based deterrence enhances India's nuclear survivability, it also risks destabilizing regional dynamics by compelling Pakistan to invest in sea-based deterrent options of its own, such as the Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missile (SLBM), thereby initiating a destabilizing maritime nuclear competition.

Policy Journal of Social Science Review
Online ISSN 3006-4635
Print ISSN 3006-4627
Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

4.4 Strategic Risks of Command and Control in Maritime Nuclear Forces

While sea-based deterrence strengthens survivability, it also introduces **unique command and control (C2) challenges**. Unlike land-based nuclear forces, which can maintain centralized and secure communication with political leadership, SSBNs operating in contested waters require some degree of delegated command authority. This creates risks of miscalculation, unauthorized use, or accidental escalation, particularly in times of crisis (Blair, 2019).

Moreover, nuclear-armed submarines are difficult to track but not invulnerable; adversaries employing advanced ASW technologies may interpret detection efforts as preparation for preemption, heightening escalation risks (Khan, 2020). The absence of reliable, secure, and real-time communication systems further complicates C2 at sea. In South Asia's volatile environment, where short decision times amplify crisis instability, these risks are exacerbated. Pakistan, in particular, views India's pursuit of maritime nuclear forces as destabilizing, fearing that it could lead to a naval arms race in the Indian Ocean (Krepon & Thompson, 2013). Thus, while maritime nuclear forces offer India survivability, they also increase **operational risks of miscommunication and inadvertent escalation**, undermining regional stability.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIAN STABILITY

India's dual pursuit of naval modernization and an evolving nuclear posture has far-reaching implications for the security architecture of South Asia. The convergence of sea-based deterrence and blue-water naval ambitions has not only transformed India's own strategic outlook but has also compelled Pakistan and other regional actors to recalibrate their security postures. These developments risk reinforcing competitive arms dynamics, escalating crises, and undermining long-term regional stability (Basrur & Narang, 2020).

5.1 Pakistan's Deterrence Calculus (Response to Sea-Based Deterrence)

Pakistan perceives India's naval–nuclear trajectory as a direct threat to its deterrent credibility, compelling Islamabad to adapt its own posture. The development of sea-based deterrence by India, particularly through the Arihant-class SSBNs and K-series SLBMs, undermines the survivability of Pakistan's land-based systems by introducing a survivable second-strike option for India (Pant & Joshi, 2020). In response, Pakistan has tested and operationalized the Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM), signaling its determination to establish a credible second-strike capability at sea (Khan, 2020).

This asymmetric response, however, introduces a destabilizing action–reaction cycle. Pakistan's reliance on conventional submarines to host nuclear-capable cruise missiles raises concerns regarding survivability, safety, and command-and-control (Clary & Panda, 2018). Moreover, with fewer resources compared to India, Pakistan faces significant challenges in sustaining a sea-based deterrence architecture, which may incentivize risk-taking in crises to offset structural disadvantages.

5.2 Regional Arms Race Dynamics

India's modernization drive has accelerated an emerging **maritime–nuclear arms race** in South Asia. India's pursuit of advanced SSBNs, carrier strike groups, and long-range SLBMs compels Pakistan to seek countermeasures, while also pushing China to expand its naval footprint in the Indian Ocean (Kapoor, 2021). This triangular competition fosters a spiraling effect, with Pakistan increasingly reliant on tactical nuclear options, while India and China emphasize survivable nuclear forces and advanced naval platforms (Joshi, 2019). The resultant dynamics risk destabilizing the fragile balance of power in South Asia. Unlike during the Cold War, where U.S.–Soviet strategic stability was maintained through

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Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

structured arms control agreements, South Asia lacks robust institutional frameworks to regulate naval or nuclear competition (Krepon & Thompson, 2013). The absence of crisis management mechanisms amplifies the dangers posed by an arms race, where technological advancements outpace diplomatic safeguards.

5.3 Risk of Crisis Instability and Escalation in the Indian Ocean

The integration of nuclear forces into naval platforms significantly heightens the risk of crisis instability in the Indian Ocean. During heightened tensions, the presence of nuclear-armed submarines and dual-use delivery systems complicates the distinction between conventional and nuclear assets, creating risks of inadvertent escalation (Acton, 2017). For instance, the targeting of a conventionally armed submarine could inadvertently threaten nuclear assets, leading to miscalculation and escalation beyond intended thresholds.

Moreover, command-and-control challenges at sea exacerbate crisis instability. Delegation of authority to SSBN commanders in contested waters raises the risk of unauthorized or accidental launch (Blair, 2019). Additionally, the introduction of sea-based deterrence lengthens the nuclear decision-making chain, increasing the possibility of communication breakdowns during crises (Narang, 2014). In the volatile context of South Asia—where short decision times and persistent mistrust prevail—these dynamics render the Indian Ocean a potential flashpoint for nuclear escalation.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

India's evolving naval–nuclear trajectory poses multidimensional challenges for South Asian stability, compelling Pakistan to recalibrate its strategic posture while regional actors pursue risk-reduction and cooperative security measures. The following recommendations offer a framework for mitigating instability through national adaptation, bilateral confidence-building, and regional multilateral arrangements.

6.1 Pakistan's Strategic Options (Asymmetric Deterrence, A2/AD strategies)

Given its resource asymmetries with India, Pakistan cannot compete symmetrically in naval or nuclear modernization. Instead, Islamabad should focus on **asymmetric deterrence and Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategies** to counterbalance India's sea-based deterrence and blue-water ambitions (Tellis, 2016). Investments in quiet diesel-electric submarines equipped with nuclear-capable cruise missiles, sea-mining capabilities, and coastal defense systems can deny India uncontested freedom of maneuver in the Arabian Sea (Clary & Panda, 2018).

Moreover, enhancing integration between conventional naval forces and nuclear-capable assets will strengthen survivability while preserving credible minimum deterrence. Pakistan may also expand its reliance on mobile and dispersed launch platforms, including sea-based cruise missiles such as the *Babur-3*, to reinforce its second-strike capability without pursuing expensive SSBNs (Khan, 2020). Such strategies enable Islamabad to offset India's advances while avoiding an economically unsustainable arms race.

6.2 Confidence-Building Measures and Nuclear Risk-Reduction

To mitigate the risks of misperception and inadvertent escalation, Pakistan and India should pursue **confidence-building measures (CBMs) and nuclear risk-reduction mechanisms** specifically tailored to the maritime domain. Existing bilateral agreements, such as the 1988 Agreement on Non-Attack of Nuclear Facilities, can be expanded to include naval nuclear assets and communication protocols for submarine deployments (Krepon & Thompson, 2013).

Establishing a dedicated **hotline for naval incidents**, alongside pre-notification of missile tests, can reduce risks of miscalculation during crises (Acton, 2017). Track-II

Policy Journal of Social Science Review

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Vol. 3 No. 9 (2025)

dialogues involving retired naval and strategic officials could also provide a platform for discussing crisis stability challenges posed by dual-use maritime systems. Although political mistrust remains a barrier, incremental CBMs focused on transparency and communication could gradually foster trust and reduce escalation risks in the Indian Ocean.

6.3 Need for Maritime Security Frameworks in South Asia

Beyond bilateral measures, South Asia requires a **regional maritime security framework** to manage competition and reduce nuclear dangers in the Indian Ocean. A multilateral forum—possibly under the auspices of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—could address maritime domain awareness, submarine deconfliction, and non-proliferation norms (Kapoor, 2021).

Regional agreements on **Incidents at Sea (INCSEA)**, modeled on U.S.–Soviet Cold War precedents, could help regulate encounters between nuclear-armed vessels (Basrur & Narang, 2020). Similarly, maritime arms control initiatives—such as limits on SSBN deployments in sensitive chokepoints—could reduce tensions. While achieving comprehensive maritime nuclear governance may be aspirational, incremental frameworks focusing on transparency, naval communications, and regional cooperation could contribute to long-term stability in South Asia's contested waters

7. CONCLUSION

India's simultaneous pursuit of **naval modernization** and the recalibration of its **nuclear posture** represents a structural shift in South Asia's strategic environment. The expansion of aircraft carrier groups, nuclear-powered submarines, and long-range sea-based nuclear delivery systems demonstrates New Delhi's intent to transition into a credible blue-water power with assured second-strike capabilities (Pant & Joshi, 2020). This trajectory is not merely a modernization of hardware but a reconfiguration of doctrine, where debates over "No First Use," counterforce options, and maritime survivability collectively enhance India's deterrence posture. Yet, this interconnected development also deepens Pakistan's security dilemma, compelling asymmetric responses and reinforcing an action–reaction cycle that threatens regional stability (Clary & Panda, 2018).

The **future trajectory of South Asia's security order** hinges on whether these parallel modernization drives evolve within a framework of strategic restraint or spiral into unregulated competition. On one hand, India's sea-based deterrence strengthens survivability and may theoretically stabilize deterrence by ensuring retaliation credibility (Tellis, 2016). On the other hand, the risks inherent in **maritime nuclear command and control**, coupled with Pakistan's resource-constrained pursuit of sea-based deterrents, amplify the danger of crisis instability and inadvertent escalation in the Indian Ocean (Acton, 2017). Without institutionalized arms control mechanisms, confidence-building measures, and maritime security frameworks, the likelihood of escalation outweighs the stabilizing benefits of survivable deterrence.

In sum, India's naval–nuclear nexus underscores a dual-edged reality: while enhancing India's strategic reach and deterrence credibility, it simultaneously **erodes the fragile equilibrium of South Asia**. Unless both India and Pakistan, with support from regional and extra-regional stakeholders, pursue cooperative risk-reduction and maritime security governance, the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean are likely to remain flashpoints of instability rather than anchors of stability in the evolving Asian security order (Basrur & Narang, 2020).

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