India’s fitful quest for seapower

Iskander Rehman

ABSTRACT
Building on several years of research, and many interviews of Indian naval officers and government officials, both serving and retired, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the context and ramifications of India's naval rise. In particular, it seeks to explain a troubling paradox: the relative neglect of the navy vis-à-vis the other services, and the seeming misalignment of New Delhi’s military strategy with its maritime geography. Indeed, the country’s enviable position at the heart of the Indian Ocean, along with its peninsular formation, large exclusive economic zone, and extensive coastlines, would seem to suggest a natural predisposition towards the exercise of naval power. In reality, however, India’s navy since independence has consistently been the most poorly funded of its military services, and has frequently struggled to make do with limited resources. The core question this article endeavors to address is whether this trend will persist, or whether various factors will combine in order to provoke a gradual rebalancing of the nation’s military strategy and force structure.

Introduction

The United States’ rebalancing towards Asia has been accompanied by a renewed interest in maritime issues. In contrast to the main theaters of the Cold War, the region’s strategic and economic geography is strongly defined by its narrow chokepoints, wide oceans, and increasingly contested waterways. As a result, the navies of the Asia-Pacific’s two great rising powers, India and China, have attracted an unprecedented level of academic attention. However, while various studies have focused on the role of China’s navy within its wider military strategy, until recently most detailed explorations of India’s growing naval power primarily focused on the Indian navy itself—rather than on how the quest for seapower fit into New Delhi’s emerging grand strategy.

Building on several years of research, field trips, and many interviews of Indian military officers and government officials, both serving and retired, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the role of the Indian Navy in
India’s grand strategy. In particular, it seeks to explain a troubling paradox: the relative neglect of the navy vis-à-vis the other services, and the seeming mis-alignment of New Delhi’s military strategy with its maritime geography. Indeed, the country’s enviable position at the heart of the Indian Ocean, along with its peninsular formation, large exclusive economic zone, and extensive coastlines, would seem to suggest a natural predisposition towards the exercise of naval power. In reality, however, India’s navy since independence has consistently been the most poorly funded of its military services, and has frequently struggled to make do with limited resources. While the navy’s fortunes have taken a positive turn over the past two decades, both in terms of funding and procurement, the so-called Cinderella service still only captures the smallest portion of the overall defense budget, which remains heavily skewed toward the nation’s manpower-intensive Army. In 2017, for example, the Indian Navy only captured 14% of the defense budget, whereas the Army captured approximately 57%, and the Air Force 22% (see Figure 1).

Over the past 5 years, Indian naval officers have repeatedly assured this author that the Navy’s share would eventually rise to 25% of the overall defense budget, only to be sorely disappointed (see Figure 2).

The core question this article endeavors to address is whether this trend will persist, or whether various factors will combine in order to provoke a gradual rebalancing of the nation’s military strategy and force structure.

This article proceeds in three parts, and launches the discussion by offering a detailed preliminary analysis, both of India’s historic maritime deficit, and of its gradual transition towards more ambitious explorations of seapower. Three different—but not necessarily competing—explanations of India's tradition of naval neglect can be proffered:

• The first, more ideational in nature, makes the contentious claim that India is bereft of a strategic culture, let alone any form of grand strategy. This geostrategic incoherence has, supposedly, accentuated the nation’s maritime shortcomings.
• The second explanation is more pragmatic and experiential. As India’s primary strategic contingencies since independence have been predominantly land-based, it is argued, it is only natural that the country’s strategic attention remains captive to continental considerations.
• The third explanation is organizational. In the absence of an effective system of higher defense management, India’s defense planning lacks political direction and strategic coherence. As a result, resource adjudication in-between the three services tends to be status quoist.

The article examines these explanations turn by turn. First, I engage in a detailed analysis of the debates surrounding India’s strategic culture. Foreign analyses of Indian strategic culture frequently conflate a perceived lack of strategic direction or purposiveness with a total absence of strategic culture. Those few observers who do concede to the existence of an Indian strategic culture and/or grand strategy habitually deem the latter to be too defensive in nature, or continentalist, to accommodate thalassocratic visions of the world. This article takes issue with these preconceived notions, and draws attention to the gradual crystallization of a rich maritime narrative and to the emergence of an increasingly hybrid strategic culture in India.

Rather than rooted in culture, could the obstacles to India’s maritime transformation be of a simpler, more contextual, nature? The second section of this article engages in a historical study of the role the Indian Navy has played since Independence, and shows that the frequent recurrence of continental challenges prevented the young nation from fulfilling its more
ambitious naval force development plans. To this day, many believe that India’s primary strategic contingencies are on land rather than at sea. There is a growing recognition, however, of the utility of a powerful navy, not only in its custodial role as a guarantor of the nation’s growing seaborne equities; but also as a valuable diplomatic asset, and as a potential source of competitive advantage in a conflict with China or Pakistan. Finally, the navy will form the most survivable leg of the nation’s prospective nuclear triad.

In a third and final section, I demonstrate that India’s unfulfilled naval potential can best be explained by the absence of an effective system of higher defense management, which successfully adjudicates amongst the nation’s continental and maritime challenges. The main obstacles to India’s rise as a great naval power are not cultural, nor are they the result of a lack of consensus within India’s strategic community on the purported virtues to be derived from seapower. They are organizational, and in the absence of comprehensive institutional reform, these obstacles will endure.

Explaining India’s maritime deficit— a cross-examination of the ideational argument

In 1992, George Tanham, a political scientist from RAND, published a monograph entitled “Indian Strategic Culture: An Interpretive Essay,” in which he made the provocative argument that India had no tradition of strategic thinking. He attributed this perceived lacuna to several historical and cultural elements. The sweeping, impressionistic nature of some of his conclusions sparked a vivid debate in India and prompted a series of animated rebuttals. Ever since, the debate over whether India has a strategic culture, or a clearly discernible grand strategy, appears to have become a permanent feature of any discussion over the nature of India’s military modernization. While such commentary is often rich and intriguing, it is also invariably marked by the absence of clear conceptual definitions. “Grand Strategy” and “Strategic Culture” are frequently employed interchangeably, and, more often than not, are depicted as being either singularly absent, or depressingly deficient. This section seeks to add greater clarity to the discussion over the ideational component of India’s maritime rise by outlining the naval contours of India’s grand strategy. It then proceeds to address the supposed absence or deficiencies of India’s strategic culture with the aim of answering the following question—is India’s current continental focus culturally predetermined?
India’s grand strategy

Grand strategy is a phrase that many understand as being intuitive. This has unfortunately resulted in something of a paradox—it is both frequently employed yet rarely defined.

One of the first, most classic, definitions remains that of Liddell Hart, who famously characterized “higher” or grand strategy as the ability to,

coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, toward the attainment of the political object of the war. 10

Since then, however, grand strategy as a concept has been substantively broadened, so as to encompass the strategic behavior of states in times of both war and peace. 11 In effect, grand strategy has become synonymous with effective long-term strategic planning. 12

India is frequently accused, both at home and abroad, of being incapable—or unwilling—to undertake such an intellectual effort. In most cases, however, this criticism rests on the perceived lack of clarity of India’s strategic planning rather than on its total absence. For instance, one Indian thinker rails against “the absence of an overarching template to guide different paths of the state and strategic bureaucracy, dispersed across the system”, which has, in his opinion, “created a palpable inertia and an intellectual vacuum.” 13 This inertia or lack of strategic focus is frequently attributed to the diffidence of India’s politicians, who remain consumed by domestic matters and electoral concerns, or to the shortcomings of the country’s severely understaffed bureaucratic elite. 14 Lack of absolute clarity, however, does not necessarily mean lack of purpose, nor should it automatically be equated with the absence of any form of long-term strategic thinking. 15

Indeed, a careful parsing of pronouncements by India’s political and military leadership does reveal certain enduring themes and aspirations, as does the study of various government sources such as the annual reports emanating from India’s ministries of external affairs and defense. These sources would suggest, notes Ashley Tellis, that there are three constants in India’s grand strategy: the pursuit and preservation of economic growth, the consolidation of overall state capacity and of its democratic credentials, and the strengthening of overall national security. 16 The last component of India’s grand strategy is perhaps the most complex. Indeed, for New Delhi, security has always been coterminous with a quest for greater strategic autonomy, and with a solid aversion for any form of partnership that could lead to either subservience or entanglement. 17 This autonomy is perceived as a key enabler—allowing India to practice a “multi-vectored” diplomacy which maximizes freedom of maneuver while minimizing the risks of friction which could flow from more solidified alignments. 18 During the Cold War,
India’s quest for greater maneuverability was couched in the grammar of third-world solidarity and non-alignment. This stance had both normative and instrumental underpinnings. As scholars such as Sumit Ganguly have noted, at a systemic level, the “policy made sense, as it enabled a materially weak state to play a role that was considerably more significant than its capabilities would warrant.”

As a result, there is undoubtedly also an intentional aspect to the seemingly inchoate nature of India’s grand strategy. In effect, its lack of codification and perceived illegibility paradoxically strengthens its capacity for adaptation. Historical studies have pointed to the inherent plasticity of any successful pursuit of grand strategy. This is something which India’s foremost strategists have fully internalized, with a much-discussed 2012 study placing a strong emphasis on subtlety, and

a skillful management of complicated coalitions and opportunities—in environments that may be inherently unstable and volatile rather than structurally settled.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the term non-alignment has largely fallen into desuetude, to be replaced in India’s foreign policy lexicon by the less ideologically freighted term of “strategic autonomy”, which some foreign observers have described as the natural, “realist mutation” of non-alignment.

**The maritime logic behind India’s grand strategy**

After having argued in favor of the existence of an Indian grand strategy, to what extent can it be described as maritime in nature? Reprising the previous taxonomy of core objectives—economic growth, democratic consolidation and enhanced security through flexibility—it can be argued that, in each case, the expansion of India’s maritime power forms a fundamental prerequisite of its grand strategy.

**The economic logic**

Since the end of the cold war, the share of mercantile trade in India’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown exponentially. Indeed, as of 2015, it was estimated that external trade constituted close to 42% of India’s overall GDP. Nearly 90% of India’s trade in volume, and over 77% of its trade in value, is maritime in nature. The importance of container ship-driven growth stands in stark contrast to the pre-reform era, when overall international trade accounted for little more than 16% of the country’s GDP. Since the early 1990s, India’s rapid industrialization and economic growth has been accompanied by steadily rising sea-born imports. India now imports close to 73 percent of its oil, the bulk of which flows into India via the western Indian
Ocean, from the Middle East and Africa. In addition to its deepening dependence on sea-borne trade and energy imports, India also possesses a large and growing expatriate population, particularly in the Gulf. These overseas workers channel billions of dollars back home every year, and their remittances play a major role in the prosperity of certain southern Indian states such as Kerala. Last but not least, the Modi government has been particularly eager to strengthen its cultural and economic ties with India’s increasingly affluent diaspora, particularly on the North American continent, but also in places such as Australia and Southeast Asia.

India’s clear prioritization of economic growth and desire to maintain an open economic order should therefore logically correlate with a decisive rebalancing in favor of its navy, which appears best placed among the three services to protect the nation’s growing seaborne equities.

**The democratic logic**

In contrast to continental powers, states that orient their power seawards can more easily calibrate and shape perceptions, and therefore appear less threatening to their neighbors. Traditional physiopolitical theory also holds that maritime polities are less hierarchical in nature, more commercially oriented, and more culturally cosmopolitan. Since Aristotle, philosophers and political theorists have pointed to the democratic virtues of navies, which cannot readily be used as instruments of domestic oppression. In contrast, large standing armies have traditionally been associated with authoritarianism, autarchic or feudal economic systems and cycles of internal repression. While such traditional delineations may seem somewhat rigid or simplistic, they do maintain a certain relevance in the case of India, which is located in a region composed of a wide array of political regimes, many of which have been rendered brittle by decades of army-led coups, and are characterized by creeping authoritarianism or severe democratic dysfunction.

In contrast, the Indian Navy has gone so far as to suggest that Indian ships compose not only “small mobile pieces of national sovereignty”, but also floating incarnations of the virtues of Indian democracy. The Indian Navy’s 2009 Maritime Doctrine thus posits, the mere presence of an Indian warship, with its multi-ethnic and multi-religious crew in a foreign harbor, will contribute to India’s image as a vibrant democracy abroad.

This perception—of the navy constituting the most democratic, non-threatening and open-minded of India’s three services—was frequently reiterated during the author’s discussions with naval officers. Invariably, the interviewees portrayed themselves as less adversarial and more open to communication with their Pakistani and Chinese counterparts than their comrades in the Army or Air Force. In one particular case, this was attributed to the,
nature of the ocean as a medium...and as an international highway for trade and communication, far from the eyeball—to-eyeball tensions along the land borders.\(^{35}\)

The Indian Navy also seeks to expand its custodial role in the Indian Ocean, engaging in anti-piracy patrols, escorting U.S. ships through the Malacca Strait after 9/11, and demonstrating its ability to emerge as a net security provider as well as a provider of public goods. Indian vessels have thus taken part in a wide range of humanitarian and disaster relief operations over the years, as well as in a series of non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs).\(^{36}\)

**The security logic**

Finally, the pursuit of seapower also allows India to engage in internal balancing, by strengthening its overall military capacities, all while maintaining a certain degree of elasticity in the conduct of its multi-vectored military diplomacy.\(^ {37}\) During the first decade following the Cold War, the Indian Navy conducted close to fifty joint naval exercises with more than twenty countries. Since then, India’s naval interactions have grown exponentially. Large-scale collective naval gatherings—such as the MILAN exercises (meaning confluence in Hindi), which include several navies from Southeast Asia and take place biennially off the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, or the IBSAMAR exercises, which involve the nations of the IBSA nations—India, Brazil, and South Africa—form the most visible, high-profile examples of India’s embrace of multilateral maritime diplomacy. New Delhi also engages in an array of bilateral exercises, with countries as varied as Japan (JIMEX), Singapore (SIMBEX), France (VARUNA), and the United States (MALABAR).\(^ {38}\) Most recently and significantly, New Delhi has moved toward more permanently expanding the MALABAR exercises to include Japan (and maybe also Australia) after many years of vacillation for fear of antagonizing China.\(^ {39}\) Figures such as the former Chief of Naval Staff Nirmal Verma have openly acknowledged that through its “foreign cooperation initiatives,” the Indian Navy would gain vital “operational skills and doctrinal expertise.”\(^ {40}\) Indian officials have arguably also proved adept at leveraging the concept of strategic autonomy for internal balancing purposes. Indeed, few—if any—countries can currently claim to engage in high-end naval cooperation with as many different partners as India. For example, New Delhi has cooperated on nuclear submarine production with Moscow, ship-based missile defense with Jerusalem, and next-generation aircraft carrier design with Washington.

One clearly detects a compelling maritime logic to India’s grand strategy. Why, then, is the nation’s national security apparatus still so heavily oriented towards the army? Could it be due to the fact that, as some have claimed, India’s strategic culture is irredeemably continentalist?
Debating the weight of continentalism in Indian strategic thought

The precise meaning of strategic culture is highly contested within the academic literature.\textsuperscript{41} In order to keep the analysis manageable, this article chooses not to explore this debate in depth, eschews any essentialist reading of the concept, and opts to revert to the broader initial definition provided by Jack Snyder in his seminal work of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{42} For the purposes of this discussion, strategic culture is therefore to be “defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to (nuclear) strategy.”\textsuperscript{43} In effect, it is perhaps judicious to state from the outset that while culture may not have the power to mechanistically determine strategic behavior, it can, in certain cases, provide certain powerful preferences.\textsuperscript{44} Keeping this in mind, to what extent can it be said that India does, indeed, have a strategic culture, i.e. certain culturally inspired strategic inclinations or predispositions? And if so, are these culturally constructed paradigms sympathetic, hostile or simply indifferent to ambitious expressions of maritime power?

The study of Indian strategic culture has been rendered particularly challenging by the lack of any form of intellectual convergence over several of its key determinants, ranging from the nation’s traditional geostrategic orientation to the relative salience of various epochs in its martial history.\textsuperscript{45} Whereas some thinkers such as Tanham attributed a perceived “absence of strategic thinking” or “passivity in military affairs” to the nation’s traditional fixation on the natural boundaries formed by the Himalayas; others, such as the famed Indian historian K.M. Pannikar, have emphasized in Mahanian terms the fact that the country’s peninsular formation has given the sea “a preponderant influence on its destiny.”\textsuperscript{46}

Two authors of a study of Indian military modernization have attributed India’s perceived strategic lacunae to a “culture of restraint”\textsuperscript{47}; while others have ascribed them to a military mindset which lacks creativity and continues to harbor an “attrition-oriented paradigm”.\textsuperscript{48} There is a similar lack of consensus with regard to the country’s history. For example, the effects of British rule on India’s strategic thinking have led to strongly divergent interpretations. Some analysts, for instance, have viewed New Delhi’s seemingly excessive fixation on its continental borders as a complex form of strategic path dependency. One such thinker has argued that India’s continentalist orientation should be interpreted as a legacy of the policies of the Raj, whose administrators had historically privileged the Indian Army over the Indian Air Force, whose role was largely confined to air policing, and the Indian Navy, which was almost systematically neglected.\textsuperscript{49} Others, however, have taken an opposite view, pointing to Imperial India’s history of expeditionary warfare, as a means of exhorting
India to become a more assertive maritime power and extend its influence over the entire Indian Ocean Region.\(^{50}\) A similar divergence of opinion is apparent in-between the writings of an Indian academic such as Waheguru Pal Sidhu, who argues that in India the formation of Indian strategic culture was in fact interrupted by British rule, and Tanham, who famously asserted that “the experience of the British Raj provided India with a geopolitical frame of reference that continues to influence present-day strategy.” \(^{51}\) Equally, some Indian authors have referred to ancient texts such as *The Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* as providing the foundations for Indian strategic culture,\(^{52}\) while others have dismissed the relevance of such manuscripts to contemporary Indian thought.\(^{53}\)

All this would appear to demonstrate that, rather than an absence of strategic culture, India may, somewhat paradoxically, suffer from a surplus of potential strategic reference points.

Indeed, a close study of Indian military history reveals the existence a remarkably diverse set of strategic sub-cultures throughout the history of subcontinent, ranging from the more nautically minded Cholas or Marathas, to the land-based armies of the Mughals and Rajputs.\(^{54}\) This has led some eminent military historians to conclude that such a variety of approaches to statecraft and military power throughout history precludes the notion of an overarching, quintessentially Indian, strategic culture.\(^{55}\) Departing from the same observation, one could arrive at a very different conclusion. The hybrid, variegated, quality of India’s strategic culture is its defining characteristic, and a fitting reflection of the diversity inherent to the subcontinent’s strategic past, as well as of the wealth of its deeply syncretic intellectual tradition.\(^{56}\)

Historiographers have aptly noted the extent to which history, like cartography, can be viewed as a mere representation of reality.\(^{57}\) A society’s understanding of its own history is to a large extent embedded within narratives, complex mediums through which nations engage not only their citizens and bureaucratic constituencies, but also the wider world.\(^{58}\) Depending on the strength of their persuasive power, narratives can structure the perception of geopolitical realities and act as effective catalysts for strategic adjustment.\(^{59}\) New Delhi’s geostrategic orientation seawards will thus hinge in large part on the strength of the consensus within India’s strategic community on the need and requisite urgency of such a shift.

**The crystallization of India’s maritime narrative**

While India’s strategic community remains conflicted over the legacy of British or Mughal era strategic thinking, there has been a concerted effort—particularly amongst advocates of Indian naval expansion—to promote certain defining moments in India’s maritime past.\(^{60}\) This has resulted in
the emergence of a maritime soft power narrative that centers largely on a major historiographical theme: Ashokan Pacifism and the Buddhist Legacy.

The Emperor Ashoka, of the Mauryan Dynasty, is widely acknowledged in India as one of the most enlightened rulers the subcontinent has ever known, along with the Mughal-era Akbar the Great. Ashoka’s rule also represents one of the few moments in India’s long history when almost the entirety of the subcontinent was unified as a common strategic entity. Having inherited vast tracts of land, Ashoka foreshore violent conquest after the bloody battle of Kalinga, which resulted in tens of thousands of enemy casualties. From then on, he chose to extend Mauryan rule through the Buddhist concept of “dharma” or exemplary conduct. This was accomplished in large part through the dispatch of high-profile Buddhist missionaries—such as his daughter Sangamitra—to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Members of India’s strategic community have advanced the Ashokan notion of dharma as a form of pre-modern Indian soft power, and point to India’s long-standing history as a birthplace of ideas and of peaceful cultural diffusion. Whereas China invaded and occupied Vietnam for over a thousand years, India spread Buddhism and the Hindu concept of sacred kingship to Southeast Asia not by sword and flame, but via trade and itinerant missionaries. The fact that ancient India did not engage in long-term occupation or widespread forcible conversion in Southeast Asia is viewed as particularly significant.

The latest version of the Indian Navy’s Maritime Doctrine opens with a short historical preview which describes how traders, and Buddhist and Hindu philosophers traveled to Southeast Asia, imparting the region with a distinctly Indian flavor, while an Indian diplomatic official in Beijing depicted the peaceful propagation of Buddhism as a “multi-millennia old bond that India shares with the rest of the Asian continent, and which acts as a testament to the power of its civilizational pull.” In another sign of the renewed emphasis on India’s maritime past east of the Malacca Straits, the Indian Ministry of Defense and External Affairs joined hands in 2012 to dispatch a sail training ship, the INS Sudarshini, on a 6 month voyage throughout Southeast Asia. In the course of the departure ceremony, a Ministry of External Affairs official described the initiative as an attempt to “retrace the civilizational and historical links between India and South East Asia.” Increasingly, therefore, there appears to be a meeting of minds in-between Indian navalists and Indian officials, with a gradual merging of narratives. The former Indian national security advisor Shivshankar Menon has thus attributed India’s alleged continental mindset to “centuries of colonial rule”, while underscoring that much of ancient Indian prosperity and security was predicated on a “maritime strategy that included Southeast Asia.”

More recently, India’s Ministry of Culture launched Project Mausam, an initiative which, according to the official press release,
at the macro level aims to reconnect and reestablish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; while at the micro level, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional milieu.\textsuperscript{68}

Some recent efforts by retired Indian naval officers and historians, however, may come to jar with this appealing soft power narrative.\textsuperscript{69} Indeed, contemporary scholarship has begun to place an increasing emphasis on the nautical endeavors of the Chola Dynasty, which held sway over much of Southern India and Sri Lanka from the ninth to the thirteenth century.

Studies have focused, in particular, on the eleventh century maritime trade wars that opposed the Chola empire to the Sri Vijaya kingdom, which lay nestled on the Malacca Strait. The conflict appears to have been motivated, primarily, by the desire of the Chola ruler’s desire to break the Sri Vijaya’s monopoly over Southeast Asian SLOCs. The Cholas proceeded to cobble together a small armada, composed of a hodgepodge of merchant vessels, catamarans, and dhows, traversing the Bay of Bengal, and disgorging thousands of Indian soldiers on Southeast Asian shores. This previously little known episode of South Asian history, which resulted in a resounding Chola victory, would seem to indicate that Indian maritime power could also be exerted in a more predatory manner.\textsuperscript{70}

By and large, however, the focus has been on the early, more peaceful, days of India’s seafaring past. This suggests a strong desire to forge a cultural narrative that is both supportive of New Delhi’s maritime reorientation and reassuring to the rising power’s smaller Asian neighbors.

There would therefore seem to not be any deep-rooted cultural barriers to a greater rebalancing towards naval assets. Could the overbearing weight of India’s land-based forces simply be the result of the nation’s recent history and of a resultant prioritization of continental security?

**The tyranny of contingency: Land-based circumstances and continental priorities**

In order to answer this question, this article’s second section examines the role the Indian Navy has played in India’s military operations since independence.

**A blue water blueprint**

Contrary to many commonly shared assumptions, India has long harbored blue water ambitions. In fact, even during the short twilight period of colonial rule—following the conclusion of World War II and before the advent of Indian independence—British military planners had already began to lay the foundations for a much expanded Indian fleet. In 1944, a report
had been commissioned by the British Chiefs of Staff Committee on the size and composition of post war forces in India.\footnote{71} While many in London had already begun to reconcile themselves to the reality of an independent India,\footnote{72} the report still envisaged India’s navy as a dominion navy, supplementing and complementing Royal Navy actions, rather than taking on a wholly separate strategic role.\footnote{73} Nevertheless, the report had laid out a much more ambitious role for the Indian Navy, which it envisioned taking on greater responsibility within its own maritime backyard. Part of this can, no doubt, be attributed to the growing recognition in Whitehall that, following 6 years of intense conflict, London could no longer afford to extend the same level of security guarantees as in the past.\footnote{74} According to British naval planners, an expanded Indian Navy was thus expected to ensure the security of the subcontinent’s maritime trade, while repelling, if necessary, any attempts at (Russian) amphibious landings. A series of planning documents counseled the training of specialized amphibious formations within the Indian Army, and the creation of a small, rapid reaction, expeditionary force to respond to low-level instability throughout the Commonwealth. The proposed fleet architecture was much more ambitious than anything that had preceded it. Indeed, post-war development plans recommended a “balanced” naval force, of three cruisers, eight destroyers, eight frigates, and a large number of minesweepers and torpedo boats. Follow-on reports projected a dominion naval force that incorporated even more high-end naval assets, such as light aircraft carriers, and submarines.\footnote{75} As Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh, one of the Indian Navy’s official historians, has pointed out, British influence over the Indian Navy would be preserved, albeit in an indirect fashion, through London’s monopoly over supplies and spare parts.\footnote{76}

With the advent of Indian independence and partition, however, the subcontinent’s naval future took a different turn. The formerly undivided Royal Indian Navy (RIN) was split between India and Pakistan, with newly independent India inheriting about two thirds of the fleet. As many of the sailors and technical ratings of the RIN had been recruited amongst Punjabi Muslims, India witnessed an exodus of over 47% of its sailors to Pakistan.\footnote{77} When it came to the officer corps, Pakistan suffered from more acute penuries than India, although both nations’ higher command structures were cruelly short staffed in the early years following independence. As a result, both the Indian and Pakistani navies maintained a small corps of “loaned” British officers for the next decade or so.\footnote{78}

Only a week after independence, India’s Naval Headquarters issued an Outline Plan for the Reorganization and Development of the Royal Indian Navy. The introduction to the plan appears, interestingly, to foreshadow some of the Indian Navy’s looming bureaucratic challenges, while laying out a surprisingly ambitious maritime vision,
The Navy and Army of India as united forces have existed for over three hundred years. The Army at the date of partition numbered some 480,000 men and was fully equipped as a modern fighting machine. The RIAF (Royal Indian Air Force) has existed for ten years and at the date of partition possessed some eleven squadrons. The Navy, by contrast, possessed but a handful of small ships. (...) India, till recently, has been little interested in her overseas trade, nor has she appreciated her position in world strategy as the focal country of the Indian Ocean area.

Today, all is changed. (...) A Navy commanding the respect of the world is not a luxury for her but a vital necessity.

For newly independent India’s strategic community, such a fleet was to be structured around two, if not more, light aircraft carrier task forces, complete with auxiliary vessels such as tankers and repair and depot ships for extended blue water operations.

The marginalization of naval strategy

Rapidly, however, the Indian Navy’s more grandiose naval ambitions ran into a series of treacherous shoals. As Cold war divisions gradually rigidified, the Indian Navy’s strategic aims appeared less and less compatible with those of its British patron. While the Indian Navy had begun to articulate an increasingly ambitious vision for its future role in the Indian Ocean, decision-makers in London preferred to see the Indian Navy focused on more narrow, localized missions, such as anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and coastal defense. In November 1950, in a missive to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Patrick Walker, the British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, clearly articulated London’s unease:

The fact is, as I think we all realize, that there is a fundamental divergence of view between the Indians and ourselves on what the function of the Indian Navy should be. We naturally wish to see them build up a navy, which while providing adequately for their own home defense needs, would also in the future be able to make a significant contribution to Commonwealth naval strategy, on the assumption that India would be willing to cooperate. Hence the importance which we have all attached to the provision in the Indian Navy of adequate antisubmarine and minesweeping forces. The Indians, on the other hand, have been pressing for United Kingdom help in building up what they describe as a fully balanced force, including a substantial naval aviation element.

As Nehruvian India strengthened its policy of non-alignment and progressively distanced itself from the West, the United Kingdom grew increasingly reluctant to transfer high-end naval equipment to India. This became particularly apparent after Pakistan’s entry into U.S. sponsored alliance systems such as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), in the mid-1950s. For example, although London did agree, in 1957, to sell New Delhi a Majestic-class aircraft carrier in 1957 (commissioned into Indian service as the INS Vikrant in 1961), it repeatedly rebuffed India’s requests for
Oberon class submarines at reasonable prices, which led the Indian Navy to turn—albeit reluctantly—toward the Soviet Union as an alternative source for naval hardware.82

The Indian Navy’s difficulties were greatly compounded by Prime Minister Nehru’s reluctance to disburse large amounts of funds on military modernization. Navies are by nature highly capital-intensive services,83 and in India’s case, the need to invest in additional shore-based infrastructure only added to the Navy’s budgetary birth pains. Although Nehru had at times expressed enthusiasm for the Navy’s lofty maritime vision, the first Indo-Pakistani war had immediately resulted in a prioritization of the Army, and, to a lesser extent, of the Air Force.

Throughout the 1950s, therefore—and despite the political leadership’s approbation of the Navy’s pan-regional ambitions—the Cinderella Service’s share of the overall defense budget never once surpassed 12 percent. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that, for India’s security managers, in the years following independence, India’s prime strategic contingencies were on land, rather than at sea.

The Navy did play a role in India’s early campaigns of internal consolidation, whether during the forcible integration of the princely state of Junagadh, now in Gujarat, in 1947, or during Operation Vijay, in 1961, which resulted in the eviction of the Portuguese from Goa. In both cases, however, the Navy’s function was supportive and enabling, rather than decisive. During the 1962 Sino-Indian war, hostilities were confined to the continental theater, mainly out of concerns over the risks of horizontal escalation. Following the disaster of India’s defeat, the Indian Navy was relegated even further to the backseat, and its share of the defense budget plummeted to 4% in 1964–65.84 Meanwhile, the Indian Army nearly doubled in size in the decade following its defeat, going from 458,000 to 825,000 troops.85

Putting aside the perennially vexatious issue of its insufficient resourcing, perhaps the greatest frustration for the Indian Navy was its complete marginalization from higher defense management, and the conduct of military operations. This became painfully apparent during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict, which was subsequently described by Indian naval officers as an intensely humiliating experience. General J.N. Chaudhuri, the Indian Army chief, and head of the Chief of Staffs Committee (COSC), was an authoritarian figure who micromanaged the planning of operations, and deliberately excluded the Navy chief, Admiral D.S. Soman, from meetings.86

The prime responsibility for the Indian Navy’s inaction, however, lay with the civilian government, which had issued strict directives that the Navy not proceed more than 200 miles beyond Bombay, or north of the parallel of Porbandar.87 These instructions were primarily motivated by two factors. First, India’s political leadership placed a clear priority on the defense of the
Andaman and Nicobar islands, which Indonesian President Soekarno had threatened to seize while Indian forces were otherwise preoccupied on the western maritime front. Second, the Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, had expressed concerns over opening another front off Karachi, fearing that it would indefinitely protract the conflict, thus impeding war termination. While this decision may or may not have been valid, Indian naval officers were intensely frustrated by these government-imposed strictures.

With the Pakistani Navy’s shelling of the coastal town of Dwarka, in Gujarat, the Indian Navy’s sense of grievance was further exacerbated. Although the attack caused only negligible damage (one unfortunate cow formed the sole casualty), the Indian Navy felt intensely humiliated by its inability to respond to the blatant provocation.

Adding insult to injury, the Lok Sabha and general public seemed unaware of the draconian nature of the Indian Navy’s rules of engagement (ROE). Members of parliament ridiculed the Indian Navy’s perceived timorousness, and the Indian press was virulent in its criticism.

In 1971, when Islamabad’s brutal campaign of repression in East Pakistan led to steadily escalating tensions in-between India and Pakistan, India’s naval leadership was determined to to salvage its bruised reputation and demonstrate its relevance. In the words of Admiral S.M. Nanda, then Chief of Naval Staff, the Indian Navy felt intense pressure to prove that it was not simply an “ornamental service”, for fear that otherwise it would simply be “written off.” Admiral Nanda outlined a much more offensive role for the Indian Navy and found a receptive audience in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Unlike during the 1965 war, the Indian Navy had ample time to prepare its fleet for combat readiness. In November 1971, as war loomed increasingly large on the horizon, Admiral Nanda openly declared at a press conference that the Indian Navy would target Karachi.

A month later, only a few days after war had been officially declared, Admiral Nanda made good on his promise by launching a daring series of missile attacks against Karachi. The Indian Navy displayed a rare degree of ingenuity, towing Osa-class missile boats—designed primarily for “green water” or coastal defense operations—across the Arabian Sea and towards Karachi. The use of sea-based missiles against docked vessels and land-based installations had never been attempted in South Asia, and had a devastating effect on Pakistan’s surface fleet, destroying or crippling two destroyers, as well as several auxiliary vessels. Steel fuel tanks along the coastline were hit, and the entire portuary complex of Karachi was set ablaze for several days. To this day, this operation continues to be viewed as the Indian Navy’s finest hour, and is commemorated every year on the 4th of December, through the celebration of the Indian Navy Day. Throughout the rest of the conflict, and despite the tragic loss of a frigate, the INS Khukri, to a torpedo attack, the Indian Navy
played an active role, pursuing maritime reconnaissance and strike operations in the Bay of Bengal. Toward the end of the conflict, the U.S. engaged in an exercise of naval suasion by surging a naval task force, led by a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS. Enterprise, into the Indian Ocean. From Washington’s perspective, this deployment was construed first and foremost as a means of dissuading India from launching further offensives into Western Pakistani territory. For India, however, such an action was perceived as little more than a blunt exercise in intimidation. Indeed, there is no evidence of any planned Indian offensive deeper into West Pakistan. The USS Enterprise “incident,” as it is often referred to in Delhi, was to have a lasting impact on the Indian strategic psyche.

All in all, however, the 1971 war was perceived by many in the Indian Navy as a stirring success, not only for the nation, but also for a formerly beleaguered service that had struggled to prove its utility in past conflicts. Following the USS Enterprise incident, naval chiefs argued that a more powerful Indian Navy was necessary, not so much to compete with the superpowers, but rather to “raise the costs of their intervention in the region of the Indian peninsula.” Indeed, recent archival studies would appear to suggest that India’s first forays into nuclear submarine reactor design were heavily motivated by the sense of vulnerability triggered by the USS Enterprise deployment. A few years prior, in the late 1960s, a study group of high ranking naval officers had already issued a report that envisioned a much larger fleet taking over the functions of the Royal Navy as it withdrew its forces East of Suez. After the Indian Navy’s good showing in 1971, hope was rekindled that India’s security higher defense apparatus would prove more sympathetic to such aims.

Unfortunately, the 1971 naval operations against Pakistan may have proven successful, but they also removed the only visible naval threat to India. Perhaps, partly as a result, there was no significant change in defense allocation patterns throughout the 1970s.

The Indian Navy also had to contend with the unpleasantness of inter-service turf wars, only managing to wrest responsibility for maritime reconnaissance from a recalcitrant Air Force in 1976, after over a decade of bitter struggle. Army generals lambasted what they portrayed as the, chimeric, “neo-colonialist” views of the naval study group, and asserted that Indian naval strategy should content itself with sea denial and coastal defense.

In a society marked by relatively harmonious civil-military relations, one could argue that intra-service competition might lead to positive outcomes. Individual services, through their active lobbying of the civilian leadership, infuse the debate with high-level military expertise, and generate vital information. The civilian leadership finds itself both empowered as a neutral arbiter, and better informed in its own decision-making. This is predicated, however, on the notion that the military leadership has unfettered
access to the highest policymaking circles, and that the civilian leadership has
the requisite knowledge and expertise in order to arbitrate effectively and
clearly define the nation’s key defense needs. Unfortunately, in India, as we
shall see in a later section, both of these preconditions are conspicuous by
their absence.

Under the tenure of Rajiv Gandhi, and in the late 1980s in particular, the
Indian Navy experienced something of a renewed emphasis. Although there
were no sizable changes in the Navy’s share of the overall defense budget, a
number of high-profile acquisitions, such as a nuclear-powered attack sub-
marine (SSN), the *INS Chakra*, on lease from Russia, and the *INS Viraat*, a
Centaur-class aircraft carrier acquired from the United Kingdom, attracted
the world’s attention. A plethora of hyperbolic, and sometimes somewhat
alarmist, articles spoke of India’s potential emergence as a maritime super-
power in the Indian Ocean. *Time Magazine* famously released a cover story
in April 1989, whose headline read, “Superpower Rising: Propelled by an
Arms Buildup, India Asserts on the World Stage.” During the 1980s, the
Indian Navy also participated in a number of high-profile custodial duties,
ferrying troops to thwart an attempted coup in the Maldives in 1988, and
providing active support in the ill-fated IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force)
operations in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990.

This period, however, was to prove short-lived. With the end of the
Cold War, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Indian Navy found
itself once more struggling to find suitable avenues for procure-
ment, and grappling with increasingly finite resources. The difficulties the
Indian Navy faced during this period were such that several Indian naval
officers described the 1990s to this author as a “lost decade.” With the
overt nuclearization of the subcontinent in 1998, the Navy showcased its
ability to play a potentially useful role in terms of intra-war signaling
under a nuclear threshold, engaging in coercive maneuvering outside the
Pakistani portuary city of Karachi, both during the Kargil war, in 1999,
and during the months-long standoff in-between India and Pakistan in
2001–02.

Despite the steady growth of a maritime consciousness amongst India’s
political elites, and the slow crystallization of a more coherent strategic
narrative, the nation’s military funding priorities have remained reso-
lutely continental. Is this state of affairs fated to endure almost indefi-
nitely, or is India’s military machinery on the cusp of a major strategic
readjustment?

**Toward a maritime readjustment?**

In this third and final section, it is argued that India’s unfulfilled naval
potential and disconnect in-between strategy and resourcing can be
attributed to two main factors. First, a number of longstanding bureaucratic and infrastructural failings continue to retard India’s ambitious naval modernization efforts. Second, the self-sustaining nature of continental rivalry in the subcontinent has led to competing military priorities, and—in the absence of effective higher defense management—to a certain amount of strategic confusion. The default response of India’s security managers to this newly protean security environment has been to preserve the traditional status quo in terms of resource adjudication. The article concludes by stating that absent a major effort on the part of India’s political leadership to reform the nation’s security structures, India’s naval modernization efforts will remain uneven.

**Bureaucratic and infrastructural impediments to India’s naval rise**

The Indian Navy is currently the sixth largest maritime force in the world, and as of 2016, possesses one aircraft carrier, one nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN), thirteen conventional, diesel-electric submarines (SSKs), eight destroyers, and fourteen frigates. Over the past decade, the Indian Navy has also added a variety of other high-end assets to its inventory, ranging from sophisticated long-range maritime patrol aircraft, to fourth generation fighter jets, and ships with stealth-class superstructures. Within the next 10 years, the Indian Navy hopes to boost its fleet to 200 warships, and 300 aircraft structured around three carriers (two of which will be domestically produced). In accordance with the vision laid out in the Maritime Capacity Perspective Plan 2012–27, the Indian Navy aims to evolve as a network-centric, three-dimensional force, capable of operating effectively in the air, surface and subsurface domains. Most recently, the Modi government cleared plans for the future indigenous construction of another six SSNs. New Delhi also plans to expand its fledgling sea-based deterrent and construct three to five more SSBNs.

However, although there is no doubt that the Indian Navy is modernizing, this process is a lot more uneven, and occurring a lot slower, than what cursory analyses of military capabilities might suggest. Indeed, despite the impressive nature of some of India’s most recent acquisitions, there are lingering doubts as to whether the Indian Navy will be able to reach its projected force levels any time soon. India’s Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), in a series of damning reports, has pointed to a series of debilitating time and cost overruns that consistently hobble India’s more grandiose naval ambitions. Due to an unsavory mixture of political diffidence, bureaucratic inertia, and severe infrastructural deficits, the expansion of India’s naval fleet has fallen victim to a series of “cascading delays.” In February 2014, a CAG report to parliament revealed that between 2005 and 2010, 74 percent of the Indian Navy’s refits had been completed after an
accumulated delay of 8,629 days, or 23.6 years. The delays were attributed to the rapid ageing of many of the IN’s ships, infrastructure constraints at Indian dockyards, and to the lack of timely availability of critical spare parts. Indeed, it is estimated that close to 60 percent of India’s ships are approaching obsolescence. Most indigenous shipbuilding programs have also experienced severe delays, and older vessels are often being decommissioned faster than they can be replaced.

While India’s first indigenously built aircraft carrier, the INS Vikrant was launched in August 2013, the ceremony was more than 4 years behind schedule, and it is now not expected to join the fleet until late 2018. Meanwhile, due to a series of delays in construction and procurement, as well as the loss of a Kilo class submarine in an accident, the state of India’s subsurface fleet is cause for growing concern. With only 13 operational submarines remaining, India’s submarine fleet remains far short of the force levels envisioned by India’s Cabinet Committee on Security in 1999, when it approved a 30 year plan for the construction of 24 conventional submarines. It is important to note that while additional resourcing is essential to the Navy’s long-term plans, many of the service’s more immediate travails stem from cumbersome procurement and acquisition practices. Clearance for decision-sensitive paperwork can prove inordinately slow. In the course of private conversations, military officers spread across all three services repeatedly complained about the morale-sapping effect of these chronic delays, and pointed to the persistence of archaic filing methods which only exacerbate the issue. Paradoxically, these bureaucratic failings have occasionally obliged the Navy to return unspent funds at the end of the fiscal year to the treasury, even though the service remains in dire need of additional platforms and spare parts.

Finally, the Indian Navy suffers from the same malady as its sister services—the increased difficulty to attract the best and brightest into its ranks. The Indian MOD has highlighted the challenges of addressing manpower shortages in an economic environment marked by “lucrative alternative career venues,” and the Indian Armed Forces have repeatedly requested for additional funds to pay for increased in staff levels, and for a progressive revamping of pay and conditions of service. Unfortunately, India’s traditionally status quoist civilian bureaucracy has thus far displayed a high degree of reticence to effectively address these demands. As a result, the Indian Navy continues to suffer from an acute shortage of officers and sailors. This state of affairs is, some have argued, partially responsible for the Indian Navy’s recent spate of accidents, as officers with limited technical expertise and operational experience have been entrusted with highly sophisticated vessels. If the Indian Navy’s manpower deficiencies are not promptly addressed, such tragedies may indeed become tragically routine.
The self-sustaining nature of continental competition and the challenge of competing priorities

The Indian Navy has, over the past decade or so, been pursuing an ambition plan for expansion—albeit with mixed results. The rapid growth of India’s economy has liberated a steady flow of funds, even as the Navy’s share of the defense budget has remained at relatively low levels, and the overall defense budget has continued to flicker in-between 1.7 and 3 percent of India’s gross domestic product (GDP). It would appear, however, that the past decade has not witnessed a reprioritization in the favor of the Navy. Indeed, New Delhi may now have access to more resources, but it has yet to develop the institutional and political capacity to mobilize those same resources effectively, and to modernize strategically in response to a broad spectrum of challenges. Each service receives more funds in nominal terms, but the overall strategic outlook and order of priorities remain pretty much the same.

Recent developments along both the Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian borders might in fact ossify—rather than erode—the hold of continentalism on India’s national security policy. Over recent years, India has been engaged in a substantive revamping of its basing and transport infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and has implemented a number of measures designed to arrest what is increasingly perceived in New Delhi as a rapidly deteriorating military balance. Chief amongst these measures is a massive augmentation in ground forces deployed along the border. In 2011-12, the Indian Army raised two infantry mountain divisions of around 40,000 men, and began recruitment for a more irregular force of tribal scouts in frontline Himalayan states such as Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. In May 2013, following a tense three-week standoff with a PLA platoon in the Depsang valley, approval was given to raise a new mountain strike corps to deploy in the eastern portion of the LAC. India’s efforts to improve its infrastructure and add thousands more boots on the ground will inevitably prove onerous. Indeed, India’s expansion of its ground forces has been accompanied by a rise in personnel costs, a trend which may well increase the Army’s share of overall defense expenditure even further, even as personnel spending continues to eat it into its capital outlay. As some commentators have observed, this manpower-centered approach to conventional deterrence may not prove to be the most effective or economically viable.

As both Delhi and Beijing continue to strengthen their forces along the border, and Chinese actions grow increasingly assertive, the attention of India’s strategic decision-makers may find itself increasingly captured by transhimalayan, rather than by transoceanic, security dynamics. Meanwhile, tensions have also grown along the line of control (LOC) with Pakistan, with both nations periodically trading heavy artillery fire and engaging in cross-
Caught within such a tense and geopolitically dynamic neighborhood, it has often proven difficult for India’s naval constituency to make a compelling case for increased funding, or for a maritime readjustment. Some navalists have argued that, by virtue of its peninsular geography and privileged position athwart Beijing’s main sea-lines of communication, India possesses something of a game-changing maritime edge over its Chinese neighbor. This body of thinkers argues that India should reallocate funds away from ground forces, and toward the navy. This reallocation would serve to resource a more cost-effective strategy, which focuses on imposing heavy costs on China at sea, rather than on land, primarily through the disruption or interdiction of its flow of maritime trade through the Indian Ocean. While such arguments have become increasingly widespread, they are also often unaccompanied—at least in the open domain—by serious operational research (OR), and neglect to take into account the manifold difficulties associated with the establishment of a blockade. As historical studies have shown, blockades against large land powers can prove to be prohibitively costly, both in terms of time and resources, and have often foundered when not carefully integrated into a wider, cross-theater, military strategy. The arguments of the navalists have thus run into fierce opposition from other Indian strategists, who have questioned the effectiveness of peripheral actions on continental great powers such as China, particularly within the context of a brief, localized war along the border. In many ways, this discussion mirrors some of the most archetypal debates held amongst military theorists over the advantages and/or disadvantages to be derived from pursuing a strategy of horizontal naval escalation against a formidable continental adversary.

Another argument has been to suggest that by threatening to engage in horizontal escalation, the Indian Navy could either deter Pakistani sub-conventional provocation, or, in the event of conflict, provoke war termination on favorable terms. While this argument may have held merit fifteen years ago, certain developments in Pakistan’s own naval and shore-based anti-access capabilities would now render it much more difficult for the Indian Navy to rapidly and decisively exert sea control along Pakistan’s littoral. Last, but not least, the projected nuclearization of Pakistan’s fleet threatens to provide Islamabad with the possibility for escalation dominance at sea. This does not mean, however, that the Indian Navy has no useful role to play in times of war. Regardless of the possible effectiveness or operational feasibility of a distant blockade, a putative Indian threat to Chinese shipping could have its own deterrent effect, and cause decision-makers in Beijing to think twice before initiating hostilities in the Himalayas. If the PLAN does begin to deploy more vessels in the Indian Ocean, or seek to establish permanent bases in the region, these might provide the Indian Navy and
Air Force with a more effective set of targets in the event of a Sino-Indian war. While it is unlikely that tactical gains in the Indian Ocean theater would, in and of themselves, lead to a wider strategic victory, successfully exercising the naval option could have powerful symbolic ramifications, reinforcing military morale and India’s “will to war.”

Meanwhile, acts of naval suasion along the Makran coast might still serve a useful signaling function—or as a threat-in-being—in the event of renewed tensions with Pakistan, and potentially service a cost-imposing strategy, by forcing Islamabad to divert a portion of its aerial defenses away from its terrestrial borders, or to maintain its submarine fleet along its coastline in order to better shield its maritime approaches. As New Delhi’s indigenously designed cruise missiles grow in range and sophistication, India’s ships could also begin to play more of a central role in wartime contingencies, serving as mobile firebases and conducting tailored, standoff strikes against targets deep within an enemy’s interior. Finally, the Navy will eventually host India’s most secure second-strike systems—in the form of its flotilla of indigenously designed ballistic missile submarines (SSBNS).

The absence of adjudicating structures

Studies of the nature of military effectiveness have indicated that diverse threat environments, where the challenges to national interests are numerous and not immediately perceptible, can complicate strategic assessments and result in uncoordinated policies. It has also been shown that the quality of threat (i.e., its clarity) has more meaningful consequences for military effectiveness than the quantity or level of threat. For many decades, New Delhi’s maritime concerns were numerous, but diffuse, and none of them seemed as urgent to address as the challenges posed along the nation’s borders. As India’s overseas presence and interests continue to grow, and as it begins to transition, in the words of its Foreign Secretary, from being a balancing to a leading power, this rigid dichotomization of security concerns has begun to appear increasingly artificial. The future envisioned by Indian security managers is not so much of India as a continental or a maritime power, but as a full-spectrum great power—in the vein of the United States—with the capacity to address both its immediate continental challenges, which are not likely to dissipate any time soon, and its more long-term maritime objectives.

In sum, what appears to be required is less a strategic transformation than a strategic recalibration. Ideally, this could be accomplished via resource redistribution rather than through additional expenditure, and through the crafting of a coherent, balanced, national security strategy. Indeed, analysts have long pointed to the importance of political coherence in the formulation of defense planning, particularly when a security bureaucracy seeks to adopt
a “portfolio” approach in response to multiple, and occasionally competing, military challenges.153

This article has demonstrated that there is now a broad consensus over the need for India to strengthen its naval capacities, and that there are no deep-rooted, ideational, or cultural barriers to a more vigorous pursuit of sea-power. Yet if one were to consider that grand strategy remains, at its heart, an “investment problem,” it becomes rapidly evident that even as New Delhi has begun to more cogently define its maritime interests, it has continued to overinvest in landpower, and underinvest in seapower.154 The absence of any elite consensus on how and when to reallocate resources in-between the services, however, suggests that until now the potential domestic political costs to military recalibration have been perceived by India’s leadership as being too high and the process too arduous.

Indeed, the explanation behind this continued strategic disconnect is not cultural, but organizational. There is a vast body of literature on the various domestic barriers to self-strengthening reforms, and on the effects of organizational dysfunction on a state’s ability to adroitly extract and convert its resources. Klaus Knorr and Paul Kennedy have both observed that there are wide variations in how states respond to systemic pressures, and that these differences can often be attributed to the states’ respective levels of societal or institutional cohesiveness.155 In his detailed study of instances of “underbalancing” behavior, Randall Schweller notes that states with high levels of integration are the most likely to balance effectively when confronted with external threats, while those suffering from lesser degrees of elite cohesion will underreact, balance inefficiently or incoherently, and adopt “policies defined by the lowest common denominator.”156

Over the past few years, numerous observers have drawn attention to the various pathologies that continue to affect Indian civil-military relations almost seven decades after independence.157 Perhaps one of the most serious symptoms of India’s civil-military malaise has been the continued absence of a higher defense structure that can effectively adjudicate in-between the nation’s increasingly numerous security requirements, set priorities, streamline acquisition and procurement procedures, and upset profoundly entrenched resource allocation patterns.158

The prolonged absence of a Chief of Defense Staff (CDS), despite a widespread recognition of its urgent necessity, means that the prime forum for inter-service discussion continues to be the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), and the Integrated Defense Staff (IDS), two bodies with no real decision-making power. It is important to note, however, that while creating such an institution is an essential first step, its existence may not suffice, in and of itself, to alter current force structure imbalances. Indeed, the difficulty will be to succeed in creating a CDS with genuine authority over three service
chiefs that have long been accustomed to a high degree of operational autonomy. Another challenge will be to get a freshly minted CDS to behave as a joint leader rather than as a more powerful patron of his own service.\textsuperscript{159}

It is perhaps the political class’s apathy—more than any persistent proclivity for overassertive control—that has had the most deleterious consequences, as it has led to the almost absolute empowerment of an intermediary class of often ineffectual bureaucrats in the Indian Ministry of Defense (MOD), and to a natural tendency toward inertia.\textsuperscript{160} Close observers of the nation’s civil-military dynamic have aptly described it as “an absent dialogue”, with excessively compartmentalized levels of national security decision-making.\textsuperscript{161} Whereas some theorists have distinguished in-between unified and divided models of democratic civil-military arrangements, India’s particular system can perhaps best be described as rigidly siloed, with each actor operating within the narrow confines of its own bureaucratic fiefdom.\textsuperscript{162}

Each branch of India’s military continues to promulgate its own service-specific doctrine, and as of now there exists no tri-service equivalent of a National Defense White Paper. This presents a stark contrast with Asia’s other great rising power, China, which has explicitly laid out the rationale for its naval reorientation in its recent Defense White Papers.\textsuperscript{163}

Conclusion

This analysis presented here has demonstrated that the obstacles to the emergence of India as a major naval power are primarily of an organizational nature. Absent a meaningful, structural, reform of New Delhi’s national security apparatus, the Indian Navy will continue to suffer from a critical strategy-resource mismatch, running the risk of dashing expectations not only in New Delhi, but also in Washington, whose strategic community has long viewed the Indian Navy as a critical partner in the policing and protection of the Asian commons.

There are some indications that the Modi government is according more attention to maritime security issues, most notably by laying the groundwork for a more robust cooperative security architecture in the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{164} Concerns have also become more widespread over China’s increasingly routine submarine deployments in India’s maritime backyard,\textsuperscript{165} its growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and over the potential strategic ramifications of the much-touted Maritime Silk Road.\textsuperscript{166} As these maritime threat perceptions become increasingly systemic within India’s security community, there is a possibility they will act as catalysts for greater naval expenditure.

Meanwhile, in the course of private conversations with this author, Western defense officials have expressed cautious optimism with regard to the potential for future reforms, pointing, for example, to the fact that their
Indian counterparts have sought to draw inspiration from the United States’ own reorganization efforts, and most notably from the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act.167 The most recent version of India’s Maritime Strategy was reportedly extensively “peer-reviewed” by the Navy’s sister services prior to its release, as part of an invigorated effort towards intellectual harmonization amongst the three services.168 Indian defense officials have also indicated that the nation’s first tri-service White Paper was in the offing, with the promise that the nation’s hierarchy of priorities—and attendant force structure plans—would finally come together within a coherent strategic framework. As always, and especially when it comes to guarantees of major reform, only time will tell. Until then, India will remain a maritime great power in the making.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges comments and criticisms on earlier iterations of this article from Sumit Ganguly, Captain Gurpreet Khurana (Indian Navy), Shashank Joshi, Luis Simon, Manjeet Pardesi, Jean-Luc Racine, former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd.), and Toshi Yoshihara. The author is also deeply indebted to a number of Indian military officers and officials, who agreed to answer his many questions over the years.

Notes


3. Jakub Grygiel has argued that, “at the level of foreign policy, geography is a geopolitical reality to which states respond by formulating and pursuing a


11. Paul Kennedy, for example, has defined grand strategy as, “the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation of the nation’s long-term interests.” Paul Kennedy, “Introduction” in Grand Strategies in War and Peace, edited by Paul Kennedy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

12. Barry Posen and Andrew Ross have provided perhaps one of the most workable, and succinct, definitions of grand strategy, which they describe as providing “a set of action-oriented principles that prioritizes among and connects threats to an overarching vision of the state’s role in the world.” See Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” International Security, 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997), 3.


14. See, for example, Daniel Markey, “Developing India’s Foreign Policy Software,” Asia Policy 8, 2009.


17. Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland have argued that while there has been “a strategic core has nevertheless emerged and endured that broadly shapes India’s approach to world affairs. This strategic worldview emphasized autonomy, flexibility, and a desire to avoid dependence on stronger powers.” See Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland, “Institutions and Worldviews In Indian Foreign Security Policy,” India Review, 11, no. 2 (2012), 76–94.

18. Most recently, India’s Foreign Secretary provided one of the clearest articulations of this mindset by stating that, “In India’s current position it is possible to make a case that a simultaneous pursuit of multiple relationships ceates a virtuous circle where each can drive the other higher,” See, “Remarks by Foreign Secretary at the Release of Dr. C. Raja Mohan’s book launch: Modi’s World-Expanding India’s Sphere of Influence.” (July 17, 2015), Indian Ministry of External Affairs, http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25491/Remarks_by_Foreign_Secretary_at_the_release_of_Dr_C_Raja_Mohans_book_Modis_WorldExpanding_Indias_Sphere_of_InfluencequotJuly_17_2015(accessed July 18, 2015).

19. Sumit Ganguly, “Introduction,” in India’s Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect, edited by Sumit Ganguly (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1. The evolving nature of Cold War alignments in the third world meant that India’s own geopolitical orientation shifted over the decades, particularly once the Nixon Administration initiated a rapprochement with China. New Delhi then found itself drawing much closer to Moscow, both countries signing The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1971. While the relationship could not be defined as an alliance by any means, it did lead to close security cooperation and diplomatic coordination. For a good overview of Indo-Soviet relations during the Cold War, see, Vojtech Masny, “The Soviet Union’s Partnership with India,” Journal of Cold War Studies, 12, no. 3 (2010), 50–90.


23. For “realist mutation,” see Guillem Monsonis, “India’s Strategic Autonomy and Rapprochement with the U.S,” Strategic Analysis, 34, no. 4 (July 2010), 611–24.

organized by the National Maritime Foundation at the India Habitat Center, New Delhi, http://meaindia.nic.in/myprint.php?id=190017885&d=29&sz=c&m=y&pg=1&flg=&searchdata1= (accessed July 28, 2011)


35. Author’s interview of former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sushil Kumar, Noida, December 2012. Strategic commentators have long drawn attention to the differences in service cultures and perspectives, which can appear particularly prevalent in-between naval and ground forces personnel. See J. C. Wylie, Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989; first pub. 1967), 42.


41. For an overview of the academic discussion surrounding the concept of strategic culture, see Lawrence Sondhaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 1–14.


43. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture*.


45. The most thoughtful recent study is that conducted by an Australian academic in Ian Hall, “The Persistence of Nehruvianism in India’s Strategic Culture,” in *Strategic Asia: Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis et al. (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016), 141-169.


Drawing on an extensive analysis of the treatment of strategy in seminal Hindu texts, Indian historian Kaushik Roy has argued that there is a dualistic tradition in Hinduism with regard to statecraft: dharamyuddha, which is more moderate and defensive in orientation, and katayuddha, which is closer to realpolitik and more offensively-minded. See Kaushik Roy, Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia: From Antiquity to the Present (New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Lawrence Sondhaus, for instance, notes that the Arthashastra was unknown in recent times until rediscovered by an Indian scholar in 1904, casting doubt over claims that it has had any consistent influence on strategic thinking throughout Indian history. See Sondhaus, Strategic Culture, 93.


India’s uniquely syncretic tradition, due to its unique combination of “internal pluralism and external receptivity,” has been discussed at length by the famed economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. See Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity (New York, NY: Picador Books, 2005), 348.


65. Author's interview of Indian diplomatic official, Beijing, September 2011. The promotion of Buddhism has become an increasingly central component of India's soft power efforts, particularly under Prime Minister Modi.


72. Two years prior, in 1942, Sir Olaf Caroe, then Foreign Secretary in Delhi, had discreetly set up a high-level working group to examine the geopolitical ramifications of a postwar transfer of power in South Asia. See Peter John Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India’s Independence and the Defense of Asia* (Akron, OH: The University of Akron Press, 2005).

73. Even the most ardent of India’s navalists struggled at first to imagine a future in which India could singlehandedly ensure its maritime security. See K. M. Pannikar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1945), 97.


82. India’s first naval agreement with the Soviet Union was announced in the Lok Sabha on September 7, 1965. Australian naval historian James Goldrick has described in depth the extent to which India’s naval command was emotionally torn between its lingering cultural connection to the West, and the pressing urgency of acquiring new platforms. Goldrick, *No Easy Answers*, 31–4. In 1966, British diplomats posted in Delhi noted that, “There is no doubt that the decision to ‘go Russian’ was taken with real regret by the Indian Navy staff many of whom still protest, however unrealistically, that it will not affect their attitude to ourselves.” Note from A. C. Galsworthy to John Denson, “Relations with the Indian Navy–U.K. Relations with the Indian Armed Forces,” 3–5, December 12, 1966, *Commonwealth Relations Office*, National Archives London Digital Collection, accessed by the author at the U.S. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., July 21, 2015.


88. In his memoirs, Pakistani Air Marshal Mohammed Ashgar Khan described how in the course of discussions with President Soekarno and Indonesian Admiral Martadinata, Jakarta offered to try and seize the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. President Soekarno also dispatched a small naval task force, composed of Soviet-designed submarines and missile boats to Karachi, but they only arrived once hostilities had ended. For Air Marshal Khan’s narration of these discussions, see Mohammed Ashgar Khan, *First Round: Indo-Pakistan War 1965* (Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), 43–5.


97. Certain aspects of the Navy’s initial accounts have been contested, with some claiming that the fuel tanks were destroyed by air-launched ordnance, rather than by offshore strikes. See Sushant Singh, “December 4, 1971: When the Navy Got Credit For IAF’s strikes on Karachi Oil Tanks,” *The Indian Express*, http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/december-4-1971-when-navy-got-credit-for-iafs-strikes-on-karachi-oil-tanks/ (accessed December 4, 2015).

98. The term “naval suasion,” used to describe the political application of naval force, was coined by Edward Luttwak. Edward Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Seapower* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 4.


109. From 1990 to 1998, the Navy’s share of the total defense budget fluctuated in-between 11.5 and 14.5 percent. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Indian Navy no longer benefited from “politically friendly” prices when purchasing Russian platforms and equipment, and struggled to finance its modernization efforts. See Rahul Roy Chaudhury, “Indian Naval Expenditure in the 1990s,” Strategic Analysis, 22, no. 5 (1998):675–90.


117. “Challenges for India’s New Naval Chief,” IISS Strategic Comments, no. 16, 2014.


122. Despite the ubiquity of computer systems in the offices of the Defense Acquisition Council (DAC), most paperwork is still treated manually.


126. Bharat Karnad, “Indian Navy Cast Adrift,” The New Indian Express http://www.newindianexpress.com/opinion/Indian-Navy-Cast-Adrift/2014/03/07/article2094542.ece (accessed March 07, 2014). In the course of the past two years, India’s fleet suffered a series of mishaps, ranging from an accidental explosion aboard a fully-armed Kilo class submarine, which led to the death of 21 sailors and officers, to ships running aground. In February 2014, after another accident aboard a Kilo class boat led to additional casualties, Admiral D.K. Joshi, then Indian Chief of Naval Staff, resigned. When interviewed a few months after his resignation, the Admiral openly deplored the delays he had experienced in obtaining timely repairs and key spare parts (such as submarine batteries) for his fleet. See, “Quit Due to Dysfunctional Environment in Navy, Admiral Joshi Says,” The Times of India, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Quit-due-to-dysfunctional-environment-in-Navy-Admiral-Joshi-says/articleshow/44808803.cms (accessed October 15, 2014).


128. A nation’s “conversion capability,” or ability to convert resources into a well-balanced, trained, and technologically proficient force is a key metric when gauging its military power. See Ashley Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000), 143.


130. See Jeff M. Smith, Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books: 2014), 35. See, also, Rahul Bedi, “Indian Army

131. The mountain strike corps was initially to comprise two infantry divisions, one artillery division equipped with lightweight howitzers, and two light armored brigades. See Rahul Bedi, “Indian Finance Ministry Approves 90,000 Mountain Strike Corps,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly* (May 29, 2013).

132. Personnel costs have increasingly dominated the Army’s budget, rising from approximately 70 percent in 2013 to 72 percent in 2016. As an element of comparison, personnel costs only accounted for 22 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively, of the Navy’s budget in 2013 and 2016. Author’s calculations derived from the data compiled in *IHS Jane’s Defense Budgets: India Defense Budget* (Updated January 21, 2016).


141. During both the Kargil War and the 2001–2 standoff with Pakistan, the Indian Navy surged elements from its Eastern and Western Fleets in order to engage in coercive maneuvering in the Arabian Sea.

142. In particular, the development of Pakistan’s submarine fleet, the dispersion of its naval assets among several different ports along the Makran coast, and the acquisition from China of a large number of C-802 anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). See

143. For Pakistan’s naval nuclear ambitions, see Muhammad Azam Khan, “S-2: Options for the Pakistan Navy,” Naval War College Review, 63, no. 3 (2010), 85–104, and Iskander Rehman, Murky Waters, 7–25.

144. For an analysis of China’s concerns over India’s naval threat to its seaborne trade, see Toshi Yoshihara, “Chinese Views of India in the Indian Ocean: A Geopolitical Perspective,” Strategic Analysis, 36, no. 3 (2012), 489–500.


146. The importance of moral forces in warfare, or the “will to war” was perhaps the most rigorously explored by Carl von Clausewitz. For a seminal analysis of Clausewitz’s thinking on such issues, see Raymond Aron, Clausewitz: Philosopher of War (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 117–44.


148. Some military theorists have termed this phenomenon “virtual attrition,” in opposition to physical attrition. See John Stillion and Bryan Clark, What it Takes to Win: Succeeding in 21st Century Battle Network Competitions (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2015), 4.


153. As an Australian defense planning expert notes, “Clear guidance about the priority order of risks and possible adversaries is a necessary condition for the development of


159. Mukherjee, "The Big Military Challenge."

160. Cohen and Dasgupta, _Arming Without Aiming_, 147.


