

India's Military Build-up: Intent and Purpose

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Abstract

India's increased military build-up has raised security concerns in the region, making it the centre of attention for policy makers.¹ India remains one of the most active and the largest importer of weapons systems with an 11 % hike in its 2015-16 defence budget, which has increased to 40 billion dollars.² Such trends in India's strategic posture have consequently led to an increased conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan, shifting the balance of power in favour of India. Meanwhile, Sino-Indian relations, characterised by both competition and conflict, also continue to face a wide range of challenges, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is also an important global trading zone. As China and India seek to expand their maritime dominance, experts believe that the interaction between the two will have a significant impact on regional security.³ Concerns over the growing influence of China in the IOR have led India to forge stronger defence ties with the US and its allies in the region.⁴

Introduction

The increasing military build-up in South Asia has raised security concerns and has become

the centre of attention for scholars. According to a 2011 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2006 and 2010, India surpassed China as the world's largest importer of weapons systems, indicating the country's intent to modernise its military prowess and exhibit capabilities beyond South Asia.⁵ India therefore remains engaged in a continuous arms build-up. In 2012, India tested its intermediate range Agni-V ballistic missile with a range of 5000km, enabling it to target most of China.⁶ The launch of Agni-V saw a restrained response from the Chinese government even as it emphasised the need to bolster regional stability.⁷

As a result, Sino-Indian relations continue to face a wide range of challenges, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which remains an important global trading zone.⁸ The primary concern for Beijing is the protection of its Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean.⁹ China remains most vulnerable in the Malacca Straits, which is an important transit route for 80 % of its oil imports.¹⁰ It fears that in case of a wider conflict, the enemy can block the choke points through which it trades.¹¹ On the other hand, India views the Indian Ocean as its backyard and seeks to expand its dominance in the Indian Ocean¹² as it aspires for great power status. In recent years, India has developed stronger ties with many Indian Ocean littoral states and it has strengthened its defence partnership with the US and has extended its

outreach in Asia Pacific.¹³ New Delhi is also conducting maritime exercises with the US and its partners from the region. For instance the most recent is the Malabar Naval exercise 2015 in the Bay of Bengal, signalling growing strategic ties between the US and India.¹⁴

In the context of South Asia, India enjoys conventional superiority over Pakistan, both in terms of armaments as well as forces. India has significantly boosted its military capabilities and is heavily investing to acquire new ultra-modern fighter aircraft. India plans to buy Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter aircraft from Russia, multi-role Rafale fighter jets, reconnaissance assets and satellites,¹⁵ and is building a two-tiered Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) shield in close collaboration with Israel.¹⁶ Such developments under India's military modernisation drive have widened the conventional gap between India and Pakistan and resulted in shifting the balance of power in favour of India. Against the backdrop of increasing conventional asymmetry, Pakistan is compelled to pursue counter measures such as strengthening its nuclear capabilities. Policy makers in Pakistan demand the reduction of conventional weapons in the region. Islamabad views such measures as being necessary for the fulfilment of disarmament commitments and insists that the sudden shifts and increase in the acquisition of sophisticated conventional weapons systems have led to a conventional imbalance in the South Asian region.¹⁷ Pakistan also insists on a balanced

conventional force reduction in South Asia, and regards this as an essential step for strengthening the arms control and disarmament agenda.¹⁸

In view of the aforementioned developments, this paper aims to analyse New Delhi's struggle to seek regional hegemony with systematic, albeit rapid build-up of military programmes. This paper will highlight the existing geo-strategic scenario of South Asia. Keeping in view the complex strategic challenges, the paper will address India's approach towards the modernisation of its weapons system and its strategic aims. It will also explore India's emergence as an important player in the Asia-Pacific region and emerging maritime conflicts between India and China. Moreover, this research addresses and evaluates the regional implications of India's military build-up vis-à-vis both China and Pakistan as India plays a significant role in influencing aspects of strategic stability in the region. The research also aims to identify recent shifts in India's foreign relations, especially its relations with the US. Numerous Western and Indian academic writings are available on India's military modernisation plans, however, the literature examining and evaluating Pakistani and Chinese concerns remains insufficient. This research seeks to provide the reader with a better understanding of how both China and Pakistan view such developments in the region. Moreover, the paper will also look into a wide range of official documents that are

available as primary sources. However, it is important to emphasise that some sensitive Indian government documents remain classified for the purpose of strategic ambiguity.

India's Military Modernisation

India remains one of the most active and the largest importer of weapon systems with an 11% hike in its 2015-16 defence budget, which has risen to \$40 billion.¹⁹ India remains engaged in an extensive modernisation of its naval forces while expanding influence in the IOR.²⁰ India's maritime aspirations are further exemplified by its development of ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), Arihant.²¹ Arihant is capable of reaching 2000 km with Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile (SLBMs).²² However the nuclear powered submarine will bolster India's second-strike nuclear capability, and has also given rise to concerns within Pakistan, for whom Indian efforts to develop nuclear powered submarines will yield destabilising effects on the strategic stability in the region and fuel an arms race in South Asia.²³

The introduction of Arihant into India's naval fleet will add great strength to its naval capabilities and will provide a third leg to its nuclear triad.²⁴ The International Panel on Fissile Material claims that India's uranium production is geared towards producing fuel for the reactors of SSBN Arihant.²⁵ It also reveals that India is increasing its uranium

enrichment capabilities and developing an enrichment facility (Special Material Enrichment Facility) to facilitate its nuclear submarines.²⁶

According to India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), India is working to develop Multiple Independently targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV).²⁷ MIRVs can carry multiple nuclear warheads capable of attacking several targets from a single weapons systems. The development of MIRV would allow India to enhance its first strike capability. As Vipin Narang, an associate professor of political science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) explains, it will add capabilities for a "splendid first strike" or 'escalation dominance'.²⁸ Induction of MIRVs into the weapon system also suggests that India will need more nuclear warheads to be equipped with MIRV, which will undermine its nuclear non-proliferation commitments.²⁹ Moreover, India's efforts to develop MIRV technology will negatively impact strategic stability in South Asia. Such developments could evoke panic in Islamabad, which will be compelled to further modernise its deterrence capabilities, resulting in the further escalation of tensions in the region.³⁰ Interestingly, during the cold war era, upon realising the repercussions of a MIRV equipped world, the US and the Soviet Union had sought to ban MIRVs.³¹ Henry Kissinger, serving as President Nixon's adviser at the time, said; "*I would say in retrospect that I wish I had thought through*

the implications of a MIRVed world more thoughtfully in 1969 and 1970 than I did”.³²

Indian Space Programme

The Indian space programme dates back to 1962, when the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, initially established the Indian National Committee for Space Research (INCOSPAR), which later became Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in 1969. In 1972, India accelerated its efforts to further its space programme and established the Department of Space (DOS).³³ Over the last three decades India has advanced its space launch capabilities and its space programme and is ranked among the “Elite Space Club,” along with US, Russia, China, the European Space Agency, Japan and Israel, to have satellites stationed into orbit.³⁴ India asserts that its space programme and space-related activities are strictly focused to achieve scientific and commercial benefits in the outer space.³⁵ However, it is important to mention that the satellites used for civilian purposes are hardly distinguishable from the military satellite systems and most of the space technology can be categorised under dual use.³⁶ Dual-use of space technology, therefore, remains a primary concern, making it difficult to verify whether satellites and other installations in space are either for military purposes or civilian purposes.³⁷ The basic technology used to launch a satellite in the outer space is almost similar to the technology

used for delivering a ballistic missile warhead to its target.³⁸

Space expert, Eligar Sadeh, notes that there is growing consensus in India to use the outer space for security and military purpose.³⁹ This belief was reaffirmed when then Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor, urged a military space programme for India.⁴⁰ Recent trends and the emerging space policy of India, particularly its efforts to utilise the orbit for military applications, carries global ramifications which threaten to turn space into a new sphere of military rivalry.⁴¹ The US move to facilitate Indian space programme would give India an edge over missile technology.⁴² Such actions would in fact discomfort other regional players in South Asia, particularly Pakistan, and might evoke anxiety in India's neighbourhood.

Moreover, the militarisation and weaponisation of outer space has also deepened concerns that the developments will further aggravate the global arms race.⁴³ The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS), presently under debate in the Conference on Disarmament (CD), urges all states, particularly those possessing space capabilities, to immediately shun those actions which damage the primary objective of the PAROS. The PAROS treaty aims to restrict the military uses of outer space and prevent states from acquiring military advantage in outer space.⁴⁴ However,

keeping in mind the growing challenges in the outer space, concerns have emerged about the multilateral arrangement to counter the emerging threat of space militarisation and its ability to address the recent outburst of space arms race. For years, the US has urged the global community to conform to the nuclear disarmament commitments yet its decision to provide assistance to India in the space programme will trigger an arms race in space.

India's Missile Defence System

In recent years, India has managed to establish close defence ties with Israel, which remains amongst the top arms supplier to India, behind only Russia and the US. While India has considered several options to build a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) network with the US, no progress was made in this regard. India is closely working with Israel on building a missile defence system.⁴⁵ Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and India's Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) remain engaged in the joint development of Barak-8, which is a Medium to Long range anti-air and anti-missile naval defence system. Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM) can counter air land and sea based attacks, including incoming anti-ship missiles.⁴⁶ India is developing a two tiered missile defence system consisting of two different interceptor missiles, namely Prithvi Air Defence (PAD) for the high altitude interception and the Advanced Air Defense (AAD) missile for lower altitude interception. India's effort to build Missile Defence System

will increase New Delhi's military capabilities, however it will also create a complex conundrum for Islamabad's strategic posture.⁴⁷ The introduction of Missile Defence in South Asia will escalate tensions and will challenge the deterrence credibility of Pakistan. New Delhi's pursuit for BMD will also force Islamabad to expand its missile inventory.

India's Nuclear Posture

After India carried out nuclear tests in May 1998, India's National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) released a draft nuclear doctrine in 1999, which stated that the country would build and maintain "credible minimum deterrence".⁴⁸ However, the Indian government did not adopt the draft doctrine as its official policy. In 2003, India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) announced the country's official nuclear doctrine and reiterated to maintain credible minimum deterrence.⁴⁹ While India may have officially declared credible minimum deterrence to be its doctrine, the reality of the matter appears to be different. India has chosen to build and maintain credible minimum deterrence toward China, as evidenced by the range and numbers of India's strategic missile programme.⁵⁰ However, what is credible toward China is surely not minimum toward Pakistan. Therefore, India's nuclear posture toward Pakistan cannot be deemed as minimal, but rather one that is evolving to meet deterrence requirements against China,

that far exceeds the minimum threshold required toward Pakistan. Thus according to Vipin Narang, the Indian nuclear posture is neither credible toward China, nor minimal toward Pakistan.⁵¹

The core principle of Indian nuclear doctrine also stipulates India's pledge to the "No First Use" policy. The document enunciates that Non-nuclear states will not be attacked with nuclear weapons, however, India might consider the option to use nuclear weapons in case of major attack on its territory which also includes biological or chemical attacks. This has evoked debate that India has diluted its "No First Use" policy as it reserves the right to use its nuclear weapons in case of an attack of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Moreover the development of BMD and MIRV also indicates India's shift from credible minimum posture to a more aggressive posture. Although MIRV technology gives added strength to retaliate in case of an attack by an adversary, at the same time the combination of both MIRV technology and Missile Defence Shield also tends to enhance first strike capability. Possessing both capabilities can also enable a country to carry out a pre-emptive strike against an adversary while relying on BMD to survive a retaliation attack. Similar developments in India have drawn Pakistan towards maintaining full spectrum deterrence.

India's Conventional Military Build-up

In recent years, the growing Indian defence spending and its military build-up drive has resulted in a growing disparity between the Indian and Pakistani conventional military capabilities, further fuelling regional arms race.⁵² India is conducting a large scale modernisation of its military which includes significant increases in defence budget acquiring more sophisticated hardware, investing in satellites, and strengthening its nuclear capabilities through the development of long-range ballistic missiles.⁵³ As India advances its military capabilities, the growing conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan will increase the danger of a nuclear arms race. Political scientist, Forrest Morgan writes that the increasing conventional military disparity will consequently result in a reduction in Pakistan's conventional deterrence capability and the rapid shifts in the conventional military balance between Pakistan and India will increase the chances of a large-scale conflict.⁵⁴

New Delhi has also undergone several changes in its military posture, which is exemplified through the development of its limited war doctrine, referred to as Cold Start Doctrine.⁵⁵ The doctrine envisaged a rapid deployment of its forces along Pakistan's borders in case of any major terrorist attack planned from Pakistan.⁵⁶ Moreover, it also involves swift infiltration of Indian armed forces into parts of Pakistan's territory within a short span of

time.⁵⁷ The doctrine also aims to restructure its corps into eight division-sized Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs).⁵⁸ In response to Indian 'Cold Start', Pakistan has developed a short range surface to surface missile Hatf IX (Nasr), with a range of 60 km.⁵⁹ Former Director General of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD), Khalid Kidwai, argues that Pakistan was forced to develop short range missile because of its concerns, which emerged due to India's limited war doctrine which aims to attack Pakistan, while keeping in view that Pakistan would not retaliate with a major nuclear attack.⁶⁰ Pakistan insists that India's preventive conventional war doctrine, referred to as cold start or proactive defence strategy, exacerbates Pakistan's threat perception. India in recent years has heavily invested to operationalise the Cold Start doctrine and has developed cantonment along the Pakistani borders.⁶¹

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The Indian Ocean remains a significant trading zone and represents important trading lanes of communication and chokepoints. The Indian Ocean also remains a crucial area with more than 50 % of the world's maritime oil trade passing through the region.⁶²

A former US Navy admiral and historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan notes "maritime commerce and naval supremacy, means predominant influence in the world; because, however great the wealth product of the land,

nothing facilitates the necessary exchanges as does the sea".⁶³

While India's economy takes an upward trajectory, its military strategy has seen a gradual shift from continental to maritime.⁶⁴ India aspires to play the role of a regional maritime power and it has seen a phenomenal increase in the Indian naval expenditure over the last decade which includes the development of (SLBMs) and the acquisition of aircraft carriers and stealth frigates.⁶⁵

As a result of India's maritime aspirations coupled with an increased US presence in the IOR, safeguarding the (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean has become a strategic imperative for China.⁶⁶ Beijing remains alarmed over the threats to its SLOCs in the Indian Ocean, particularly the chokepoints through which most of its trade is conducted. Around 80 per cent of China's oil imports transit Malacca Strait through Southeast Asia.⁶⁷ Chinese strategists are concerned that an adversary can choke Chinese trade through the Malacca Strait in case of a wider dispute.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, China's rising influence has led New Delhi to expand its outreach with a number of Indian Ocean littorals as seen during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in March, 2015.⁶⁹ India acquired "infrastructure development rights" for two Islands - Agalega (Mauritius) and Assumption (Seychelles) and offered the Island nations a broad range of military and civilian assistance in order to establish its influence.

Moreover, India regards Chinese increased naval presence in the (IOR) as an encirclement of India. New Delhi remains concerned over the Chinese development of ports around India's maritime neighbourhood.⁷⁰ However, China insists that its investment and the development in regional maritime infrastructure is motivated by its economic interest which will bring economic benefits to host countries.⁷¹

Furthermore, growing US naval presence in the Indian Ocean and its expanding military engagement with India and its partners in Asia Pacific has further discomfited Beijing.⁷² The US asserts that it would continue to operate in the waters wherever the international law permits calling them 'freedom of navigation' operations.⁷³ Recent US embrace of India also highlights the fact that the US along with its frontline states in the Asia Pacific is likely to isolate China, which the US fears can challenge its interests in Asia.

Ashley J. Tellis, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes that the Chinese factor has played a key role in shaping Indo-US relations and their cooperation in the (IOR), since both the US and India remain critical about China's growing influence in the IOR.⁷⁴ The ongoing US-Indo ties dubbed as 'strategic partnership' involves expanding cooperation on issues such as nuclear technology, missile technology, defence cooperation, climate goals

and expanding trade volume.⁷⁵ In the security realm, the US and India have agreed to expand cooperation on aircraft carrier technology sharing and design and cooperation on jet engine technology.⁷⁶

Indo-US Nuclear Deal

The US-India defence engagement gained further momentum after President Obama's January, 2015 visit to New Delhi, in which both countries finalised an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation.⁷⁷ Civilian nuclear talks began in 2005 between the US and India after President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh established the grounds for the full US and international nuclear aid to India.⁷⁸ The civil nuclear agreement known as '123 agreement' signed between India and the US provided India a waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) guidelines which was formed primarily in response to India's first nuclear test in 1974.

George Perkovich, a renowned nuclear specialist writes that the Indo-US nuclear deal has seriously damaged the nuclear non-proliferation regime while many hard core anti proliferation states saw the deal as an 'affront'.⁷⁹ The US had previously insisted that other states adopt strict controls on nuclear exports, however, she later lobbied for the India's inclusion into the NSG. Moreover the US efforts to favour India's nuclear

programme intensified Pakistan's concerns. US justification for its efforts to grant India NSG waiver is based on the argument that India's previous nuclear record and its commitment to non-proliferation agenda makes India eligible to be included in the NSG. However, there is growing consensus inside Pakistan that India's inclusion into the NSG would place Pakistan in a problematic situation. Decisions in the NSG are only reached through a consensus between all member states of the NSG. Pakistan insists that India's entry into the NSG, while denying Pakistan admission at the same time, would permanently block Pakistan's membership into the suppliers' cartel as India could easily veto any decision to include Pakistan in the group. According to defence expert, Shireen Mazari, the nuclear deal between the US and India and US dual policy on the nuclear issue has undermined the obligations of the US towards NPT.⁸⁰ Pakistan presses on a similar concession as given to India and insists that it has established a strong command and control system and has also strengthened its partnership with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).⁸¹

Pakistan also maintains that it is committed to global non-proliferation regime and engaged with the international community on nuclear stability and security issues.⁸² The country's security managers further claim that Pakistan's nuclear programme is as safe as of any other country possessing nuclear capabilities. This is further exemplified by the

IAEA's acknowledgment, which has described Pakistan's nuclear programme as safe and secure.⁸³ Pakistan demands that the NSG should adopt a criteria-based approach rather than country based exceptions, which are based on global powers commercial interests. Islamabad's stance on the issue stipulates that "Policy of dual standards towards South Asia, based on narrow strategic, political and commercial considerations, bodes ill for the region's long-term peace and stability."⁸⁴

Conclusion

The ongoing trends of military build-up in South Asia and the larger IOR will hinder the implementation of a strategic restraint regime. India, with its aspirations to become a global player will continue to expand and modernise its weapons systems. Meanwhile Pakistan will continue to perceive India as a major threat to its security due to the existence of several unsettled conflicts and India's conventional superiority in armaments as well as forces which remain Pakistan specific. Against the backdrop of such challenges Pakistan will continue with its posture while maintaining broad spectrum deterrence linked with credible minimum deterrence.⁸⁵ However, a wider consensus has emerged among policymakers and military experts in India and Pakistan to establish a nuclear restraint regime and has urged both countries to engage in the Nuclear Confidence Building Measures (NCBM). Such conciliatory initiatives will reduce the emerging nuclear

threats in the region that may arise in future. Also, the existence of unsettled disputes between India and Pakistan will continue to define the parameters of their relations.

In the Indian Ocean, China will continue to face opposition from India. Countering anti-China alliances will remain the highest priority for Chinese policy makers.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding challenges in the Sino-Indian relations, the two economic powers will view each other as sources of economic opportunities.

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