

# Emerging Naval Powers and the Strategic Redefinition of Maritime Avenues in the Indo-Pacific Region

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## Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as one of the most strategically important arenas in contemporary geopolitics. Growing economic interdependence, increasing relevance of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and the expansion of naval capabilities have scaled competitive amongst regional and other regional powers. This article analysis the emerging naval powers in the Indo-Pacific region by examining the maritime strategies of mainly India and China alongside the role of other emerging regional powers such as Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea. The study explores how China's expanding naval presence and strategic initiatives contributed towards change in regional maritime dynamics and how India is responding by capability development, maritime partnerships and strategic engagements in the region. It argues that maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region is becoming more multipolar, shaped not only by greater power rivalries but also by the increasing influence of middle powers and security frameworks.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security, Naval Powers, India - China competition, Strategy

## INTRODUCTION

The maritime domain has become a crucial strategic arena in the twenty-first century, with the Indo-pacific region serving as a focal point in global geopolitics. The Indo-Pacific stretches from the eastern Indian Ocean to the western Pacific Ocean and is home to the world's most dynamic economies, crucial sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and significant maritime chokepoints, with 50% of global trade and 40% of world's oil flows through this region<sup>1</sup>. Control over the maritime domain is now not only limited to ensuring commercial access but has become crucial for national security, power projection and geopolitical influence as power dynamics change and strategic rivalries deepen.

The strategic significance of maritime avenues has fundamentally changed as new naval powers are emerging, including China and India. Traditionally, maritime routes were seen as neutral conduits promoting global commerce but nowadays these routes are increasingly being reinterpreted as contested strategic corridors determined by military presence, surveillance capabilities, overseas basing and access politics. This change is part of a broader shift from viewing seas as global commons to a competitive maritime order characterized by deterrence, denial and influence.

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<sup>1</sup>Text of Vice-President's address at the 2023 edition of the "Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue." (n.d.). <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1977077@=3&lang=2>  
2022. IPOI Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative: Towards a sustainable and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region. Indian Council of World Affairs. <https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/IndoPacificOceansInitiative.pdf>

This shift is exemplified by observing China's rapid naval modernisation and growing maritime presence across the Indo-Pacific region. China is reshaping its maritime avenues in a way that promotes long term strategic access and influence through the construction of a blue-water fleet, militarisation of the South China Sea, and strategic use of ports under the Maritime Silk Road. Further, India has also strengthened its naval posture to protect vital maritime routes and regional stability by defining doctrines such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and establishing itself as net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In addition to these two nations, minilateral frameworks such as QUAD and AUKUS, and few emerging naval powers such as Japan, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam are significantly influencing the evolving maritime dynamics. In order to redefine access, control and influence at sea, these developments together point towards a strategic reconfiguration of maritime pathways, where naval power, diplomacy, technology and geography converge.

The research examines the changing strategic nature of maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific, in terms of the relationship between traditional sea powers, India and China, and new emerging navies. While the vast majority of literature on the Indo-Pacific concentrates on the rivalry between the large powers, only limited research has been done on how the growing number of navies in the region will change the operational and strategic view of important maritime routes. Historically, maritime routes have been viewed solely as transportation routes for trade, but over time have become places for surveillance, deterrence, and project power, thereby creating greater importance to states for their strategic calculations regarding security in the region.

Given this context, the objective of this paper is to assess how India and China are adapting to this evolving maritime environment and how they are responding to the concurrent rise of technologically sophisticated and strategically active navies, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam. By examining the developing maritime strategies and capabilities of all of these states, this paper attempts to place these new developments in the broader context of the transformation of Indo-Pacific maritime dynamics and assess the implications of these changes on regional stability, maritime governance, and future strategic balance in the region.

## Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with maritime power and naval strategy has changed significantly over time as the global geopolitics, technology and strategic priorities evolved. The Indo-Pacific region has attracted a great scholarly attention because of significance in global trade, security competition and power shift dynamics. Existing literature offers insightful information about the theoretical foundation of sea power, the rise of emerging naval powers, and the strategic implication of naval modernization. However, there still exists a gap in integrating technological advancements with the redefinition of maritime avenues.

Classical naval theory continues to inform contemporary analysis of maritime strategies. Alfred Thayer Mahan, who emphasized on sea dominance as a determinant of national power, continues to influence the understanding of why nations invest heavily in naval forces nowadays. He argued that economic superiority and strategic dominance can be ensured by showing control over the maritime routes; this theory is strongly relevant in the Indo-Pacific context. However, critics have pointed out that Mahan's framework does not fully explain the modern technological advancement, which is complicating traditional ideas of sea control.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Jamison; (February 9, 2022). Alfred Thayer Mahan: "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History" as Strategy, Grand Strategy, and Polemic. *Classics of Strategy and Diplomacy*.

Julian Corbett made a significant contribution towards maritime theory by offering a more subtle understanding of naval power by emphasizing limited control, sea denial and the integration of naval operations with political goals.<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary maritime environment, which is marked by disputed zones rather than absolute dominance, his theory remains relevant. His ideas were significantly utilised by scholars to explain how emerging naval powers seek influence without necessarily gaining full dominance of sea. According to recent literature on the Indo-Pacific region, it is becoming a strategic maritime theatre.<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Rory Medcalf conceptualised the Indo-Pacific region as a single strategic space influenced by maritime connectivity and security concerns.<sup>5</sup> This framing emphasizes the significance of maritime avenues as strategic assets rather than neutral areas. Studies show that the Indo-Pacific development not only reflects geographic realities but also strategic intent, particularly to counter China's maritime assertiveness.

Much literature<sup>6</sup> has been written regarding the modernisation of China's navy, and what this means for the regional security environment. It has been widely accepted by analysts and experts that the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) has undergone a tremendous evolution from a coastal defence force into a blue-water navy.<sup>7</sup> Various papers written by defence institutions and academic researchers have documented China's investments into aircraft carriers, submarines, missiles, and information systems that allow China to monitor its territorial waters. All these studies, at their core, argue that its growing navy results from a confluence of factors, including economic dependence on maritime trade for the success or failure of the Chinese economy, the desire to mitigate the potential for a strategic vulnerability created by the emergence of a new cold war, and its desire to compete on a global stage for leadership within the contemporary world construct. A great deal of literature examines the various strategic implications of China's activities in the South China Sea, including the militarisation of artificial islands, the use of Chinese law enforcement agencies to assert jurisdiction over contested waters, and how the dual capacity of China (i.e. navy and law enforcement agencies) asserting control over disputed waters. It is important to note that some studies focus exclusively on China's strategic military activities in the South China Sea, while others are more broadly looking<sup>8</sup> at China as a naval power in the broader Indo-Pacific frame.

<https://classicsofstrategy.com/2022/02/09/alfred-thayer-mahan-the-influence-of-sea-power-upon-history-as-strategy-grand-strategy-and-polemic/>

<sup>3</sup>The Corbettian Approach to strategy and International Relations | Proceedings - May 2023 vol. 149/5/1,443. (n.d.). <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/may/corbettian-approach-strategy-and-international-relations>

<sup>4</sup>Review of from Mahan to Corbett?: Intelligence Analysis: 笹川平和財団: 海洋情報 from the oceans. 笹川平和財団 | 海洋情報 FROM THE OCEANS. (n.d.). [https://www.spf.org/oceans/analysis\\_en/c1202.html](https://www.spf.org/oceans/analysis_en/c1202.html)

<sup>5</sup>Medcalf, (2014). In defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's new strategic map. Australian Journal of International Affairs. 68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.911814>

<sup>6</sup>N. Li (2009). The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From "Near Coast" and "Near Seas" to "Far Seas." Asian Security, 5(2), 144–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850902886567>

<sup>7</sup>Steve Micallef, (November 27, 2017). The Evolution of the PLA Navy and China's National Security Interests. CIMSEC. <https://ln.run/-nJul>

<sup>8</sup>Peter Suci, (April 30, 2024). China's Navy Just Turned 75 and Is Now the Largest Fighting Force at Sea. The National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-navy-just-turned-75-and-now-largest-fighting-force-sea-210819>

Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam & Ashok Kumar Murugesan (June 8, 2020). China's Rising Missile and Naval Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region: Security Implications for India and Its Allies. Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Air University Press. Air University. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2210972/chinas-rising-missile-and-naval-capabilities-in-the-indo-pacific-region-security/>

Atul Kumar (December 19, 2025). China's Nuclear Carrier Aspirations and Strategic Impact. ORF. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-s-nuclear-carrier-aspirations-and-strategic-impact>

Atul Kumar (April 7, 2025). Challenges to China's 'Below the Threshold' Military Strategy in Its Near Seas. ORF.

Many scholars have put less focus on literature about India's naval strategy, compared to other countries such as China; however, this gap has narrowed in recent years. Analysts are realising the increasing importance of India being a maritime power, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Academic studies focus on India's geographic location as an advantage, it focuses on sea denial and maritime domain awareness, and its aim to be a net security provider. Studies have examined India's naval doctrines and strategic documents in order to assess how India views maritime avenues as integral components of national security and regional stability.<sup>9</sup> There are several academic studies on India's approaches to maritime cooperation and naval diplomacy, including India's engagement in multilateral exercises, capacity-building efforts, humanitarian assistance operations, as a tool to create a stable maritime environment. On the whole, while there are many studies of China that refer to coercive ways of utilising navies, there is generally a greater emphasis on Indian cooperation and the normative characteristics of India's naval forces. However, several scholars pointed out there are various constraints on the modernisation of India's navy, such as procurement issues, industrial infrastructure shortages, and slow implementation timelines.<sup>10</sup>

Maritime Security Literature is rapidly developing in an area of technological advancements. The literature examines how the development of new missile technologies, undersea warfare, unmanned systems, and new space-based surveillance technologies are changing how we perform naval operations.<sup>11</sup> Many authors also reference both India and China as state actors currently incorporating new technologies into their navy strategies, although the depth and pace of integration differ greatly between the two nations.<sup>12</sup>

The role of other Indo-Pacific naval powers such as Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam is also addressed by present literature by framing them as contributors to a wider balance of power rather than as primary drivers of maritime evolution. Scholars highlight that these states emphasis on interoperability, alliance coordination and maritime domain awareness which complicate the regional maritime environment. Several gaps remain despite the richness of existing literature. Most of the literature treats China and India as either isolated or comparative lenses, without significantly examining the independent influence of redefining maritime avenues through technology, doctrine and strategic behaviour.

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<https://www.orfonline.org/research/challenges-to-china-s-below-the-threshold-military-strategy-in-its-near-seas>

Sujit Dutta (2025). Securing the Sea Frontier: China's Pursuit of Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea .Strategic Analysis, Vol. 29, No. 2, Apr-Jun 2005. Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). [https://www.idsa.in/publisher/system/files/strategicanalysis\\_sdutta\\_0605pdf.pdf](https://www.idsa.in/publisher/system/files/strategicanalysis_sdutta_0605pdf.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Samir Bhattacharya (March 11, 2024). India is Embracing a 'Net Security Provider' Role in the Indian Ocean Region. ORF. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-is-embracing-a-net-security-provider-role-in-the-indian-ocean-region>

Lt. Col. Dhiraj Kumar (2019). Indian Ocean Region (IOR) : India as a Net Security Provider - The Way Ahead. Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIX, No. 616, April-June 2019. <https://usiofindia.org/pdf/2019%20Apr-Jun-89-101.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>S. Carney (December 3, 2025). India's plan for naval modernization – GIS Reports. GIS Reports. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/growth-indian-naval-power/>

<sup>11</sup>Nafeesa Munawar & Irfan Farooq (2025). Transforming Naval Warfare Through Unmanned Technology: A Case Study of Ukraine. 6. 1131-1138. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15780823>

Richard Dunley (March, 2023). Uncrewed naval vessels and the span of maritime tasks. Marine Policy, Volume 149, 105481, ISSN 0308-597X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105481>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X23000088>)

<sup>12</sup>Sam Bateman and Joshua Ho (2010). Southeast Asia and the Rise of Chinese and Indian naval powers. Routledge Security in Asian Series, ISBN 13: 978-0-415-55955-3.

<https://www.routledge.com/Southeast-Asia-and-the-Rise-of-Chinese-and-Indian-Naval-Power-Between-Rising-Naval-Powers/Bateman-Ho/p/book/9780415625524>

Additionally, there is restricted integration of technological analysis with strategic implication, particularly forward-looking assessments of the Indo-Pacific dynamics.

This dissertation seeks to address these gaps by analysing India and China's naval strategies separately and situating them within a shared Indo-Pacific framework. The study aims to contribute more towards holistic understanding of emerging naval powers defining maritime space and regional security dynamics by focusing on evolving maritime avenues rather than only on naval dominance.

## Indo-Pacific Region as a Strategic Maritime Theatre

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a prominent strategic area due to the confluence of economic, military, and geopolitical factors. The term "Indo-Pacific" is a reference to the relationship between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and the shared interest of these two bodies of water as part of a large geographic region rather than as separate entities<sup>13</sup>. The reality is that events that occur in one area of the ocean can affect many different locations in the region, such as environmental changes, naval competition, resource exploration created interdependence amongst states in the region which affects trade, security and power dynamics.



Fig. 1 Indo-Pacific Region <sup>14</sup>

Source: Drishti IAS

The Indo-Pacific's economic underpinnings hinge on the constant flow of goods, energy and raw materials via maritime routes. Most of East and Southeast Asia have a continuing and structural dependence on

<sup>13</sup>Gaurav Yadav; (October 22, 2025). Indo-Pacific Region – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise. FormulalAS. <https://forumias.com/blog/indo-pacific-region-significance-challenges-explained-pointwise/>

<sup>14</sup>(24 Mar, 2025). (n.d.). <https://www.drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/24-03-2025/print>

maritime trade networks, chiefly for continuous access to vital energy supplies which stem from West Asia and Africa. Therefore, any interruption to these maritime routes will impact more than merely the initial disruptor, as any major interruption will have larger, systemic implications for both global trade stability and global economic resiliency. Thus the significance of naval capabilities is growing beyond their conventional role of defence to include the protection of maritime commerce, energy security and continuity of supply chains. Furthermore, as evidenced by a growing focus on naval modernization by many Indo-Pacific states, naval forces are now seen as critical components of both territorial protection and the safety of the economic lifeline/underpinning that allows nations to be stable and to develop.

The Indo-Pacific region has become the focal point for the changing patterns of global power. We are witnessing a decline in traditional naval powers who previously did not face any challenge in their dominance at sea and the rise of regional countries investing heavily in advanced naval capabilities. As a result of these two trends occurring simultaneously, we are experiencing a change in the maritime environment from one dominated by a single superpower to one with multiple major players, each having overlapping claims to territory and being engaged in competing military naval deployment operations.

The growing tendency of military forces deploying to the sea is particularly apparent in the areas of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. For instance, in the South-China sea area, there are many competing sovereign claims to the same territory and military assets stationed there. The presence of military forces on the waters has been a source of tension between these claimants making the South-China sea a potential strategic flashpoint. In contrast, the growth of non-regional naval forces in the Indian Ocean has demonstrated an increased interest in the control of sea lanes and the projection of political influence in the region. Both of these developments demonstrate the increasing importance of naval forces in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the region.



Fig. 2 Disputed claims in the South-China Sea.

Source: ClearIAS<sup>15</sup>

As emerging naval powers are becoming more involved in the maritime region, these nations will not only

<sup>15</sup> (2017, January 22). South China Sea: Why is it strategically important? - Clear IAS. Retrieved December 25, 2018, from <https://www.clearias.com/south-china-sea/>

respond to the existing threats but also act to shape the future of the region. They will achieve this by using naval diplomacy, developing port and other maritime-related infrastructure, and through the application of technological innovation to redefine how military use of maritime corridors and other similar resources will be managed and properly utilised. The Indo-Pacific Region is, therefore, both the stage and the impetus for the changing role of naval forces in the developing relationship between states to one governed by a system of collective and cooperative interaction between many nations participating equally in maritime commerce and security.

### **Maritime Avenues and Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific Region**

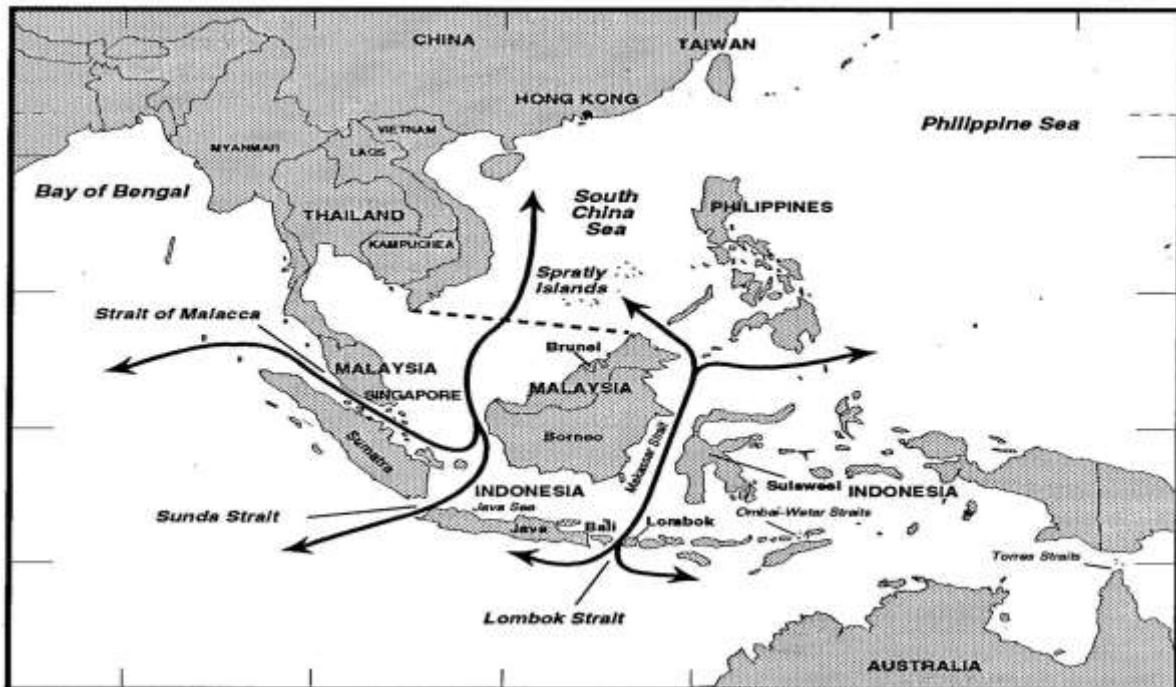
In strategic terms, maritime avenues not only mean the narrow conception of navigational lanes but also, they consist of the broader maritime space including territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), vital chokepoints, high seas and coastal regions that together allow economic activities, military presence and political influence. Control over these avenues enables nations to secure trade routes and energy flow, provide deterrence towards adversaries and show dominance across the region.

Traditional maritime theories provide a significant base to understand the contemporary relevance of maritime avenues. Mahan emphasised on the significance of control over sea routes as the basis of national power by arguing that it enables states to show dominance over commerce and exert strategic influence. Whereas, Corbett recognised the significance of sea control by highlighting the role of restricted maritime control and integration of naval power with political goals. These concepts still remain relevant and are being adapted to account for technological evolution and the changing geopolitical environment of the Indo-Pacific region.

Maritime avenues are defined by their geographical positioning and strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, the Lombok Strait and the disputed South China Sea in the Indo-Pacific region and these areas serve as focal points for both global commerce as well as strategic competition.<sup>16</sup> The marine vulnerabilities are increasingly regarded as possible national security threats, leading to the increasing securitization of these maritime areas. There is now a requirement for increased naval presence and maritime surveillance together with other tools in order to develop and achieve preferred strategic outcomes. Sea control and sea denial describe a form of control that changes as technology advances. Threats posed by missile technology, undersea warfare and surveillance systems have caused states to rethink how to best exercise control over the world's oceans. Control of the seas in a conventional sense is therefore much less practical than it has been in the past; instead, particularly regarding military action, nations are now interested in denying an adversary access to the seas and thereby controlling their own access.

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<sup>16</sup>M. Tempest (2009, April 2). Background reading: Chokepoints: Maritime Economic concerns in Southeast Asia. <https://www.eaglespeak.us/2009/04/background-reading-chokepoints-maritime.html?m=1>



**Fig.3 Strategic Chokepoints: Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok and SLOCs passing the Spratly Islands<sup>17</sup>.**

States are utilizing their naval power to establish a significant presence and deter rivals in contested maritime zones, as these zones become more populated. The Indo-Pacific is undergoing increased strategic competition as well as other persistent security issues which make it difficult for states to employ maritime space effectively. The areas of the Indo-Pacific are being disrupted by issues such as piracy, illegal fishing, human trafficking, maritime terrorism, and grey-zone activities, which affect stability at key sea lanes and chokepoints. At the same time, competing territorial claims, increased deployment of naval forces, and increased competition for maritime surveillance contribute to a climate of strategic friction. These facts illustrate that the ability to exert control over the maritime avenues will ultimately reside with naval powers, but will also require maritime governance, technological integration, and cooperative security initiatives. As a result, a comprehensive analysis of the Indo-Pacific will require an understanding of the impact of new operational challenges and the changing roles of regional maritime powers in influencing the security and stability of the maritime region.

### **China’s Emergence as a Naval Power and the Redefinition of Maritime Avenues**

The emergence of China as a major naval power reflects one of the most significant changes in maritime geopolitics over the last 30 years, particularly since the early 2000s when Beijing formally started shifting from a coastal defence force to blue water capabilities. In the last 20 years, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has evolved from a force largely confined to near-seas operations into one capable of conducting sustained deployments across the Indo-Pacific, with a notable turning point occurring after China’s 2004 “New Historic Missions” doctrine and its first long-duration anti-piracy deployment to the

<sup>17</sup>Satyajohny2b. (2016, September 29). String of Pearls dan One Belt One Road (OBOR) Republik Rakyat Tiongkok. Blog Satya Pratama. <https://pratamasatya.wordpress.com/2016/09/29/string-of-pearls-dan-one-belt-one-road-obor-republik-rakyat-tiongkok/>

Gulf of Aden in 2008.<sup>18</sup> China's naval rise has also been accompanied by a growing emphasis on the use of international maritime legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and institutional mechanisms linked to maritime governance, reflecting an effort to align strategic maritime objectives with legal and normative instruments.<sup>19</sup> This evolution has significantly altered the strategic profile of maritime trade routes, especially in terms of the total control China is gaining over not just the Western Pacific Ocean but increasingly the Indian Ocean Basin as well. China's growing naval power is influenced by both structural and strategic forces; while its rapid economic growth has made it increasingly reliant on maritime trade, this reliance on sea routes to transport the bulk of both energy imports and exports also leads to concerns about these sea-lanes being threatened often described as the 'Malacca Dilemma.'<sup>20</sup> Thus, the vulnerability of China's critical maritime trade routes has created a perception that these vulnerabilities represent a serious national-security concern for China. Together with this understanding, advanced naval power is central to China's overall grand strategy.

### Evolution of China's Naval Strategy

China's naval strategy has gone through various stages of progression. In the early post- Cold War period, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) was primarily focused on establishing a world-class naval force for the purpose of establishing dominance over the maritime domain. This focus was not only to provide protection to coastal areas but also to deter outside interference in events related to Taiwan. As China's economic and military power increased, the primary focus on great power status became no longer realistic. The 2015 military reforms and the release of China's Military Strategy marked a fundamental doctrinal shift from a purely "Near Seas Defence" posture to a dual framework combining "Near Seas Defence" with "Far Seas Protection". This transition reflected a move away from viewing the navy solely as a territorial defence force towards conceiving it as an instrument for safeguarding China's expanding economic and strategic interests abroad. The directives given in the white papers outlined this shift and the goal of enabling operations beyond the first island chain.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the maritime worldview of China changed immensely, no

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<sup>18</sup>Campbell, Caitlin (April 6, 2021). China's Military: The People's Liberation Army (PLA). Congress.Gov. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46808>

Christopher H.Sharman (November 21-22, 2014). China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy. Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies.National Defense University. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-9.pdf>

<sup>19</sup>Fravel, M. T. (2008). Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s2s6>

<sup>20</sup>The Malacca Dilemma refers to China's strategic vulnerability arising from its heavy dependence on energy imports and trade passing through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow maritime chokepoint that connects the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. A significant proportion of China's oil and commercial shipping transits this route, making it susceptible to disruption during conflict or geopolitical tensions. Chinese leadership has long viewed the possibility of external powers controlling or blocking access to this chokepoint as a major national security concern, as any interruption could severely affect China's economic stability and energy security. Consequently, the Malacca Dilemma has played a critical role in shaping China's naval modernisation, overseas port development, and efforts to diversify maritime and overland trade routes.\*

\*Ahmet Salih İkiç ( September, 2018). Chapter 9, Economic Dynamics of Global Energy Geopolitics.DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4203-2. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/malacca-dilemma/65195>

Chen Shaofeng (2010). China's Self-Extrication from the "Malacca Dilemma" and Implications. International Journal of China Studies.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228606970\\_China's\\_Self-Extrication\\_from\\_the\\_Malacca\\_Dilemma\\_and\\_Implications](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228606970_China's_Self-Extrication_from_the_Malacca_Dilemma_and_Implications)

<sup>21</sup>China's Military Strategy (full text). (May, 2015). The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of

longer just seeing oceans as being vulnerable transit routes for trade and energy supplies; the oceans also became viewed as strategic “depth” for purposes of National Security. The South China Sea and East China Sea served as both a buffer to defend against potential adversaries, and as areas where China could monitor and potentially delay its adversaries.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, control over these maritime areas is viewed as critical to achieve this out of first island chain<sup>23</sup> constraints to ensure that China maintains secure access to the broader Western Pacific.

#### The Re-definition of Maritime Routes through South China Sea

Throughout history, the South China Sea has had an important place within the Chinese maritime strategy; today it is perhaps the most evident demonstration of how China is changing the existing maritime routes that are available for commercial purposes. This area not only possesses natural resources but it is also recognized as an important global commercial navigational route. In order to support their commercial interests within this area, China has engaged in extensive land reclamation<sup>24</sup> via the construction of artificial islands, thereby reshaping both the physical and strategic nature of this region.

One of China's greatest advantages in using the artificial islands as military bases is that by developing military infrastructure upon these features, to include airstrips, radar systems, and missile platforms, China has extended its surveillance and operational range into vast stretches of the maritime environment. When combined with the established naval, air, and maritime law enforcement assets, these military installations have transformed once open maritime routes into areas of intense international rivalry, where China is exerting considerable control over the maritime environment. As such, China is utilising its full spectrum of military capabilities while maintaining a level of ambiguity that is below that of an overt military confrontation to achieve its desired strategic outcomes within the South China Sea. The actions by China within the South China Sea can be interpreted as an effort to formally establish new sets of norms governing behaviour within the maritime environment. Through the application of both legal and sovereign claims to the area, coupled with both a sustained presence and the requisite military assets, China has attempted to legitimise its control over significant portions of the global maritime commercial trade routes, thereby avoiding any potential conflicts at the national or international level.

**Source : NBC News**

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China [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm)

<sup>22</sup>Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. (2018). Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy (2nd ed., Naval Institute Press, 2018). <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/red-star-over-the-pacific-revised-edition-chinas-rise-and-the-challenge-to-us-maritime-strategy-2ndnbsped-1682472183-978-1682472187.html>

<sup>23</sup>Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow (2016). Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualizes the Pacific "Island Chains. The China Quarterly, 225, pp 1-22 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000011.[http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0305741016000011](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0305741016000011)

<sup>24</sup>Institute for Security and Development Policy. (n.d.). Understanding China's position on the South China Sea disputes. Retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/understanding-chinas-position-south-china-sea-disputes/>

The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China) <https://pca-cpa.org/cases/>



**Fig. 4.1 Hughes Reef, South China Sea, built with dredged, reclaimed land in the Spratly Islands<sup>25</sup>**

Fig. 4.2 Fiery Cross Reef is shown in this handout satellite image dated September 3, 2015 and provided by CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/Digital Globe on Sept. 14, 2015<sup>26</sup>

#### Expansion into the Indian Ocean Region

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has expanded its naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region, even though near-seas focus is still an important pillar of China's national defense strategy. China's PLAN originally deployed to the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy, where it gained operational experience conducting sustained operations away from China and providing logistical support to vessels as they journeyed through the Gulf of Aden and beyond. The deployments evolved into a strategy of establishing a continuous maritime presence in the IOR over time. Access by China to ports and logistical facilities outside China has given it the ability to operate along critical maritime trade routes linking East Asia with the Middle East and Africa. These access arrangements are generally described as being for economic reasons, but they also serve strategic purposes by showing flexibility to secure maritime routes that are critical to its energy security interests. The growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region is changing the way we have considered previously existing assumptions about the maritime balance of power in that region and is creating new dynamics in the competition between navies in the Indo-Pacific. By increasing its operational reach, China is transforming previously existing neutral maritime transit routes into combat zones for the competition for resources and other security interests.<sup>27</sup>

#### Technological Foundations of China's Naval Power

China's naval transformation depends upon technological advancement for the future of its evolving maritime pathways; thus, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is investing heavily into improving

<sup>25</sup>Source: China builds islands in disputed South China Sea: IHS Jane's Defense Weekly. (2015, June 11). NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/china/china-builds-islands-disrupted-south-china-sea-ih-janes-defense-n308856>

<sup>26</sup>China completes runway on controversial reclaimed island. (2015, September 25). NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-completes-runway-controversial-spratly-islands-project-n433646>

<sup>27</sup>Steve Micallef, (November 27, 2017). The Evolution of the PLA Navy and China's National Security Interests. CIMSEC. <https://ln.run/-nJul>

N. Li (2009). The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From "Near Coast" and "Near Seas" to "Far Seas." *Asian Security*, 5(2), 144–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850902886567>

weaponry, platforms and systems through modernising them. Aircraft carriers are a major focus of this improvement process as they allow China to use airpower remotely from land, as well as exerting influence over the world's oceans to a greater extent than ever before. While the plan for carrier development is still underway, it indicates an increasing willingness on the part of China to begin operating on the high seas as a long-term goal.

The submarine forces represent a critical piece of China's overall naval strategy. Nuclear submarines are designed to give China a second option in case of an attack and are essential to the successful execution of Second-Strike capability. The new, advanced diesel-electric submarines also provide an increased capability to deny access to large parts of the sea through advanced capabilities of anti-ship cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles. As a result, a combination of submarines and advanced missiles makes up the mainstay of China's A2/AD<sup>28</sup> strategy. In addition to platforms, China has focused on integrating C4ISR systems into its overall military naval strategy. The integration of space-based sensors, UAVs, and improved maritime surveillance networks will provide the PLAN with an increased level of situational awareness and, thus, enable it to have a much larger and more precise ability to monitor and influence its maritime pathways.

### **A2/AD: Reshaping the maritime avenues**

The A2/AD approach from China has shown the world that it can attain control of much of the maritime area through increased capabilities of aircraft, ships, and submarines, thereby creating greater risk and cost for those operating within a disputed area of the ocean. Although there is no absolute control of the sea, this new doctrine allows China to establish the framework within which nations will operate. Moreover, the emergence of A2/AD systems has increased the security of commercial shipping operations. As the perception of contested seas continues to grow, there is a gradual diminishment of the boundary of peacetime competition and crisis periods.

China's ascension to power as a significant naval force in the Indo-Pacific region represents the most profound transformation of the maritime environment since the establishment of the United States' pre-eminence. This new order represents a substantial challenge to the established concepts of maritime governance, free navigation, and global freedom of trade that have been the standard since World War II. Maritime events surrounding China have resulted in the creation of an increasingly complicated and competitive maritime environment.

The A2/AD approach may provide capabilities that allow China to challenge regional and extra-regional countries and establish new norms regarding maritime governance and also provide opportunities for the potential increase of maritime security for commercial shipping in the region. However, an increased Chinese naval presence and assertiveness raises the potential for increased miscalculations and incidents on the high seas.

### **India's Emergence as a Naval Power and the Strategic Redefinition of Maritime Avenues**

India's aspiration to become a major naval power in the Indo-Pacific region has developed through its geography, maritime history and strategic situation. India is geographically positioned along the major SLOCs passing through the Indian Ocean region. In the last 20 years, India's maritime strategy has become an intrinsic part of its national security, economic growth, and influence in the region, as well as

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<sup>28</sup> F. R. Meraner (2025, November 13). China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial strategy. The Defence Horizon Journal. <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/>

elevating its status as a maritime power. India's naval expansion from 1947 until the end of the 20th Century, was primarily focused on land security concerns. The shift towards an increased focus on the ocean has occurred since the early 2000s, as a result of increased globalisation, energy security concerns and a changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

Naval strategies employed by India's armed forces have transitioned from focusing in the early stages mainly around missions related to the defence of the country and its surrounding areas, to the actual exercise of influence through the control and use of the vast ocean resources. In the last two to three decades, as Indian trade and the need to protect overseas interests grew, the idea of protecting a nation's coastline was replaced by increasing the nation's concept of security from establishing itself as a maritime power.<sup>29</sup> India's evolving maritime outlook is reflected through officially released doctrinal and strategic documents such as the Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004, updated 2009), Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007), and Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015), which collectively outline India's transition from a coastal defence-oriented posture to a broader regional security role aimed at safeguarding sea lines of communication and contributing to stability in the Indian Ocean Region.

India's development of the Indo-Pacific Ocean as a single area of responsibility emphasised the importance of the oceans to connect the Eastern and Western Pacific Oceans with Africa through the Oceans adjacent to India. This shift in Indian strategy is clearly outlined in many of India's planning documents focusing on Indian naval engagements and the use of Indian Naval Forces in regional operations.

The Indian Ocean region is an important strategic location for the Indian navy. Maritime security exists as one of India's primary objectives to pursue security and stability in the region while promoting freedom and strength on the waterways. Regular anti-pirate operations, humanitarian assistance missions and Indian navy's adoption of developing maritime security partnerships and cooperation are indicators of India's commitment toward providing secure and stable maritime routes for trade and maritime activities. The Andaman - Nicobar Islands have particular strategic importance, as they provide India an advantage over the traffic and trade routes that pass through one of the most busiest maritime choke points of the world's economy - The Malacca Strait and having enacted maritime infrastructure development at the Andaman Nicobar Islands, and investment in capabilities related to surveillance, monitoring, and intelligence on traffic in critical maritime spaces.

Strengthening India's ability to shape maritime routes throughout the Indo-Pacific region requires increasing the modernisation of the Indian naval fleet. The Indian navy has adopted a balanced mix of aircraft carriers, submarines, surface combatants and maritime aviation in its structure of forces, which shows the Indian Navy's focus on having an area of operations in which they are able to maintain sea control through sustained presence and not simply by employing denial-oriented forces. The aircraft carrier is the foundation of the naval capabilities of India, allowing for power projection, aerial defence and humanitarian assistance operations across large amounts of maritime space. Aircraft carriers are resource heavy, requiring a large scale of investment, however they give India a decisive strategic advantage and visibility in the Indo-Pacific. Submarine forces have a complementary presence in the Indian naval strategy. Nuclear-powered submarines provide strategic deterrence against other nations in the region and also provide the ability for India to carry out sea denial and surveillance and to enhance India's ability to carry out operations in contested maritime environments. India's surface forces are made

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<sup>29</sup>Capt. Sarabjeet S Parmar, (May 15, 2022). NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: INDIA'S MARITIME OUTLOOK. National Maritime Foundation. <https://maritimeindia.org/national-perspectives-indias-maritime-outlook/>

up of destroyers, frigates and corvettes and they have increasingly been equipped with advanced sensors, missiles and electronic warfare systems. The Indian Navy's indigenous shipbuilding programmes have increased the self-reliance and operational readiness of the fleet and also contributed to the advancement of technology within the defence industrial base.<sup>30</sup>

India's maritime strategy relies heavily on technology. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)<sup>31</sup> is a greatly desired area of focus at an international level due to the growing need to track the vast areas of water and respond to both traditional and non-traditional threats.<sup>32</sup> India has established a coastal surveillance network, implemented satellite-based tracking and monitoring systems, and created information fusion centres which will increase situational awareness for maritime operations in India. The surrounding oceans are being monitored much more effectively now that space based assets have been integrated with maritime operations. Utilizing unmanned systems and Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft (LRMPA) further extends the range of surveillance for the Indian Navy, providing for greater awareness of the critical maritime avenues. An important part of India's recent focus is on the development of Network Centric Warfare (NCW) capabilities which are based on the integration of maritime platforms and corresponding maritime sensor systems into a combined operational framework. By developing a network-based capability among multiple military services, the response time for each service's respective operations will be reduced while at the same time providing for increased levels of effectiveness for their respective maritime operations during times of complex maritime activity.

The development of the Indian Navy's maritime power coincides with India's increasing emphasis on the use of maritime diplomacy as an element of national power. Through naval exercises, visits to ports and training of regional partners in maritime capability, India uses the three activities above in conjunction with its regional engagement strategy. The efforts to do so are intended to strengthen relationships between nations, create interoperability with nations within the same region and will illustrate India's continuing commitment to providing security within that region. India has multiple forms of multilateral engagement including participating in forums on regional maritime security and conducting joint naval exercises in the region, all showing India's commitment to cooperative security versus an aggressive pursuit of dominance. India's aim is to be a stabilising force within the region with the intent of supporting the development and implementation of a rules-based maritime order. This goal aligns with India's broader diplomatic objectives and lends credibility to India among the other regional nations. Finally, the use of the Indian Navy in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, supports the development of India as a responsible maritime power and contributes to the establishment of maritime areas being used for both unilateral and cooperative use.

India's perspective on maritime routes varies significantly from that of other leading naval nations. Unlike most other nations that focus on the militarisation of maritime regions, India focuses on regulating access to maritime space as well as assuring the stability and freedom of navigation within that space. This indicates that India uses the concept of an "open ocean route" as a basis for its reliance on free access to open sea lanes. In addition, India's focus on regulating access to maritime areas also suggests a commitment to safeguarding its interests along maritime routes. Additionally, India acknowledges that the

<sup>30</sup>PIB (December, 2025). Sailing Towards Self-Reliance: The Indian Navy's Aatmanirbhar Bharat Journey. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2198298&reg=3&lang=1>

<sup>31</sup>Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) refers to the effective understanding of any activity associated with the maritime domain that could impact security, safety, economy, or environment.

<sup>32</sup>January 2025. Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indo-Pacific Region. Indian Council of World Affairs. ISBN : 978-93-83445-88-2. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/MaritimeDomainAwarenessweb.pdf>

growing competition among states in maritime zones throughout the Indo-Pacific will cause nations to continue developing competing strategies to safeguard their interests. Therefore, in order to protect its national interests in maritime zones along the Indo-Pacific, India is investing in surveillance capabilities, building infrastructure, and maintaining a military presence in the region.

The rise of India as a naval power will have an important influence on the maritime environment of the Indo-Pacific region. By improving its military capabilities and expanding its relationships with other nations in the region, India is creating a more balanced, multipolar maritime environment. The presence of multiple naval powers can help to stabilize the maritime environment by spreading power among different nations and thereby avoiding the concentration of power in any one country. However, the country is limited in its ability to develop a robust naval capability due to a lack of available resources, a lack of access to advanced technologies, and competing national security concerns. In addition, India faces the challenge of balancing its requirements for both continental and maritime commitment to provide for its national defense; therefore, it is taking a prudent, deliberate approach to its naval development, which will ultimately enable India to become a significant player in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific maritime environment.

### **Other Emerging Naval Powers in the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific maritime order is not only shaped by strategic competition between India and China but also by the progressive naval powers such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam, which contributes to a more multipolar and strategically complex environment. Japan's technology driven and alliance oriented naval posture demonstrates how advanced submarines, destroyers and surveillance systems can protect sea lines of communication without overtly militarising and can also provide defence from potential maritime threats,<sup>33</sup> offering India lessons in interoperability and coalition based security. Australia's focus on long range operations, advanced submarine capabilities and integrated surveillance systems emphasises the significance of consistent presence and cooperative engagement<sup>34</sup>, supporting India's stance on minilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea demonstrates how industrial capacity and technology innovation provides naval modernisation while extending operational reach beyond its territorial concerns, providing India with the idea of interconnectivity of maritime security and defence manufacturing. The strategic position of Indonesia at strategic points teeming with maritime activity between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean points to a need for strong maritime governance along with strong coastal defences and the need for building strong maritime domain awareness. All three of these areas directly touch upon India's own obligations in the Indian Ocean Region. Vietnam's asymmetric deterrence-based naval strategy shows how much of a difference smaller powers can make in contesting maritime space using submarines and controlling coastal areas without trying to gain full maritime dominance. All of these actors provide evidence that in the Indo-Pacific region, maritime power and influence will not only be defined by great power competition but rather by layered and networked security systems, advances in technology, and regional partnership. Thus, for India, all of these elements will call on India to strategically balance its own ability to create new capabilities through

<sup>33</sup>Defense of Japan 2023. Ministry of Defense. [https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w\\_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023\\_EN\\_Full.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_EN_Full.pdf)

<sup>34</sup>R. Laird (February, 2026). Australia's Defense Investment Strategy: Balancing Long-Term Capability Development with Near-Term Readiness. Defense.info. <https://defense.info/defense-decisions/2026/02/australias-defense-investment-strategy-balancing-long-term-capability-development-with-near-term-readiness>.

domestic capability development, increased technological depth, increased maritime diplomacy and planned force structure in order to protect its sea lines of communication, manage competition among states and sustain regional stability in a maritime environment that has become increasingly contested.

## Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, maritime competition and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region have become a main focus. The changing structure of maritime avenues in the Indo-Pacific, as a result of global power and economic interdependence changes and developing technology. Emerging naval powers' role is increasingly redefining maritime avenues in the Indo-Pacific as both strategic rivalry and collective stability dictate current and future naval forces to create and defend their maritime interests.

This research analysed how China and India are examples of emerging naval powers and how each is using their unique geographic location, and aspirations to develop their maritime capabilities. The study of other emerging naval powers demonstrates that the Indo-Pacific region is becoming more complex (multipolar) and that middle powers like Japan, Australia, and a few Southeast Asian countries are beginning to constitute a more complex position for maritime dominance and the creation of norms and partnerships. Therefore, their combined presence indicates that maritime security is inextricably linked across the region.

India's strategy for balancing its preservation of national interests and strategic autonomy among an increasingly complex Asian maritime environment is to exploit what it can learn from the lessons of the Chinese navy and other developing navies in order to pursue its long-term strategy through technological integration and effective maritime diplomacy. Yet, India's path to establishing and maintaining free access to global maritime routes is fundamentally different from that of either China or the United States based on the fact that India is a democracy whose resources are limited. Given those constraints, India prefers an inclusive approach to establishing and maintaining maritime order.

Ultimately, how emerging naval powers will manage competition versus cooperation within the Indo-Pacific Region will play an important role in determining the future of the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and ultimately in determining the future of the maritime domain. By emphasizing the development of balanced capabilities, regional engagement, and adherence to international norms through the establishment of itself as a key stakeholder in establishing a stable and open maritime order, India is establishing itself as a responsible maritime power who will play an important role in preserving connectivity of maritime avenues as opposed to conflict.

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