

Published as [“India’s Unrealized Maritime Dreams,”](#) *The Diplomat Magazine*, July 2019.

INDIA AS A MARITIME POWER: VISIONS AND COMPULSIONS

Abhijnan Rej

As the strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific takes form, the world looks to India – the fourth largest economy in the region and, notionally at least, one of its most formidable military powers – to help uphold the order in the maritime theatre that construct supports. In many ways, this is not an unreasonable expectation. India’s stakes in the region has never been higher, whether due to commerce or the direct intrusion of powers like China into its immediate strategic space. But more fundamentally, modern history is yet to show us an example of a great multidimensional power that was also not a significant maritime player. As India’s self-described quest to become a leading power continues, will it also eventually become a force to reckon with in the seas?

[Writing in a 2013 essay](#), British military historian Hew Strachan noted: “Geography provides strategy with underlying continuity, a point that is generally true [...], but is especially important for the sea.” Indeed, India’s vantage point, at the geographic centre of the Indian Ocean, has long led many to believe that Indian dominance over that maritime space is but a matter of time, and that its claim over that space a foregone conclusion. [In 1993 a Chinese military officer](#) for the first time articulated his country’s apprehensions about the latter: “We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as an ocean only of the Indians.”

But India’s geography also significantly *constraints* its ability to project power in the seas, hobbled as the country is with unsettled land borders with both China and Pakistan. India’s continental compulsions thus include paying sustained attention to land warfare, having fought five land wars in its 72-year history as an independent state. This in turn has dictated service allocations within India’s defence budgets. At the same time, contemporary India’s political

aspirations – as well as the ideation of its policy elite – has implied that New Delhi is no longer content to remain a mere regional power whose maritime engagements are strictly pragmatic in nature.

In Strachan’s telling, geography shapes strategy. But strategy is also, as he notes in the same essay, a matter of making choices in the face of constraints. The following is a story of how the Indian Navy continues to balance ambition in face of compulsions – and the extent to which it has been successful in doing so.

How India Looks at the Seas

In 1909, 110 years ago, George Nathaniel Curzon, who had retired from the viceroyship of British India four years before, [delivered a lecture in Edinburgh](#) outlining the importance of India for the British imperium. In his address to the Philosophical Institute, Curzon emphasized India’s geostrategic importance, noting its central position between continental Africa to its west and the Australia and “the China Seas” to its east, outlining a picture reminiscent of contemporary India’s thinking around the Indo-Pacific. It is no small surprise that contemporary Indian nationalists – who have always envisaged a robust geostrategic role for their country while remaining disdainful of India’s former colonial masters – found inspiration in Curzon’s vision. When the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first came to power in the late 1990s, a former foreign minister’s very public appreciation of Curzon’s strategic vision for India led prominent Indian strategists such as [C. Raja Mohan to advocate](#) the establishment of a British Raj-style “India Centre”. In this strategic picture, India – by virtue of its geography – would emerge a “royal piece on the chessboard of international politics,” as Curzon put it in his 1909 lecture.

Yet, Curzon’s Edinburgh address also touched upon a central conundrum in India’s defence strategy arising from geography. India’s vast continental frontiers – much greater during the

Raj, which included what became Pakistan and Bangladesh – implied that maritime Britain’s emphasis on sea power would have to be tempered by the empire’s continental compulsions, which now included managing India’s land borders. Almost immediately after the country’s independence – and the creation of an independent Pakistan with it – the security environment deteriorated. The two countries have fought four wars till date. Meanwhile, China’s annexation of Tibet in 1950 removed a major buffer between the two Asian states, confounding India’s continental defence problem further. China – like then, as now – continues to disregard the British Raj-era McMahon Line that separates the Tibetan Autonomous Region and India as the formal border between the two countries. In 1962, India fought China over this disputed border, a war which ended in a rout for India.

These experiences have translated to an overemphasis on the Indian Army in the country’s military doctrines and strategic orientation at a cost to the navy. By way of an example, when India released its first public armed forces joint doctrine in 2017, the near-total lack of discussion of force projection – and cursory attention to naval power – struck [many analysts](#) as reflecting India’s continued obsession with land warfare in general, and Pakistan in particular. The 93-page document failed to mention India’s only conventional tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command (in the eponymous islands).

The irony was that the joint doctrine was signed off on by then-Indian Navy chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba, in his role as chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee – a position that is automatically allocated to the chief with the longest-serving experience. In fact, Lanba himself admitted to India’s contested border with China being a factor in determining whether New Delhi will enter naval coalitions in the Indo-Pacific at a May 2018 think-tank event. Responding to a question about the possible militarization of the US-Australia-Japan-India “Quad” grouping, [he bluntly noted](#): “India is the only country in the quad with a land border with China. In case of conflict, nobody will hold our hand.”

It is not simply a matter of disputed borders (with China, but also crucially Pakistan) that has shaped how India thinks about naval power. In his 2013 essay Strachan had noted that the end of the Cold War in 1991 –with the implication that the Soviet Union ceased to be as an existential threat almost overnight— removed the overtly militaristic elements reverting western maritime strategy back to a “traditional form”. He noted that since then, “[n]avies are used to secure trade, to exercise political influence without necessarily resorting to war, and to apply sea power to sustain order at sea, particularly in the control of piracy and terrorism.”

In case of India, the end of the Cold War also saw its economy opening up with major reform efforts initiated the very year the Soviet Union was officially dissolved (triggered in part due to a balance-of-payment crisis following the US invasion of Iraq that year). The Indian Navy’s role in the five wars the country has fought has been peripheral in all but one. In 1971, Indian naval pressure on Pakistan contributed to a decisive victory which led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh. Opening up and integrating its economy to the world through trade – as well as rising incidents of terrorism in India since the 1990s – have left a pronounced imprint on the country’s maritime strategy, emphasizing the very elements Strachan noted in the context of Western navies.

In its latest iteration in 2015, [India’s maritime strategy document](#) delineated the navy’s primary and secondary areas of responsibility principally according to the country’s commercial and energy interests. The former includes the entirety of the western Indian Ocean, Indian sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as critical Indian Ocean chokepoints. (It is important here to note that about 60% of India’s petroleum imports are from the Persian Gulf area alone.) While the document does refer to the threat posed by China (albeit without naming that country) as a source of traditional security challenges, the overall tenor of the document is benign. Interesting enough, the 2015 maritime strategy considers the South and East China Seas as well as the Western Pacific as secondary areas of interest for the Indian Navy. When

the document was released, the Indian Navy was yet to adopt the Indo-Pacific as a unified strategic theatre. Whether a revised edition of that document – if and when it comes out – reflects New Delhi’s political enthusiasm for that notion remains to be seen.

Aiming Without Arming

India’s continental military orientation has most clearly manifested in its defence budgets over the last 20 years, where the navy’s share of the pie has consistently remained the smallest. In 1999, it stood at 12.6% of the defence budget; twenty years later, it is at 14.3% (**Figure 1**).

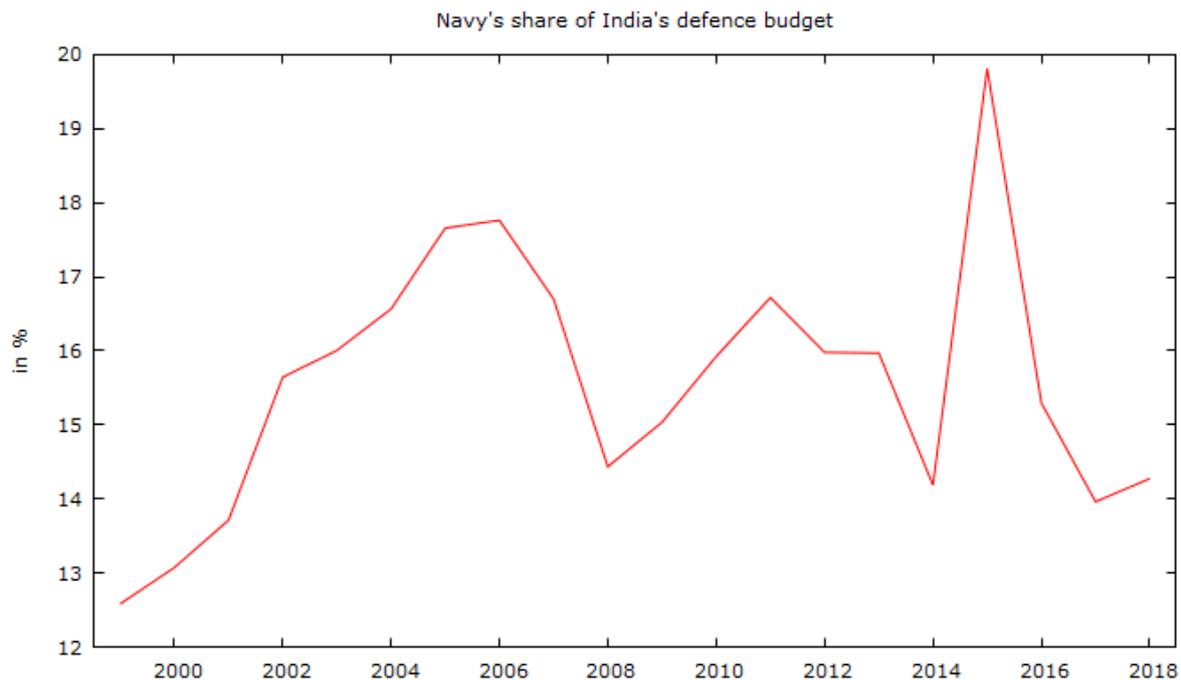


Figure 1: Navy’s share of India’s defence budget, 1999-2018

But that is not all. The principal pathology that haunts India’s military spending – as has been [highlighted by many](#) – is that a large chunk of it is set aside for pay and allowances, principally for the man-power intensive army. Without drastic increase in military spending in real terms over the years, this has meant that the share of money India spends on buying new weapons – its military modernisation spending – in the country’s defence budget has averaged around 30 percent over the last two decades, a phenomena U.S. security-studies professor Vipin Narang

termed India’s propensity for “aiming without arming” (playing on the title of a well-known 2012 book on Indian military modernisation). By way of an example, last year India spent *nine times* on its army’s pay and allowances and pensions than what it did on the navy’s modernisation (Figure 2).

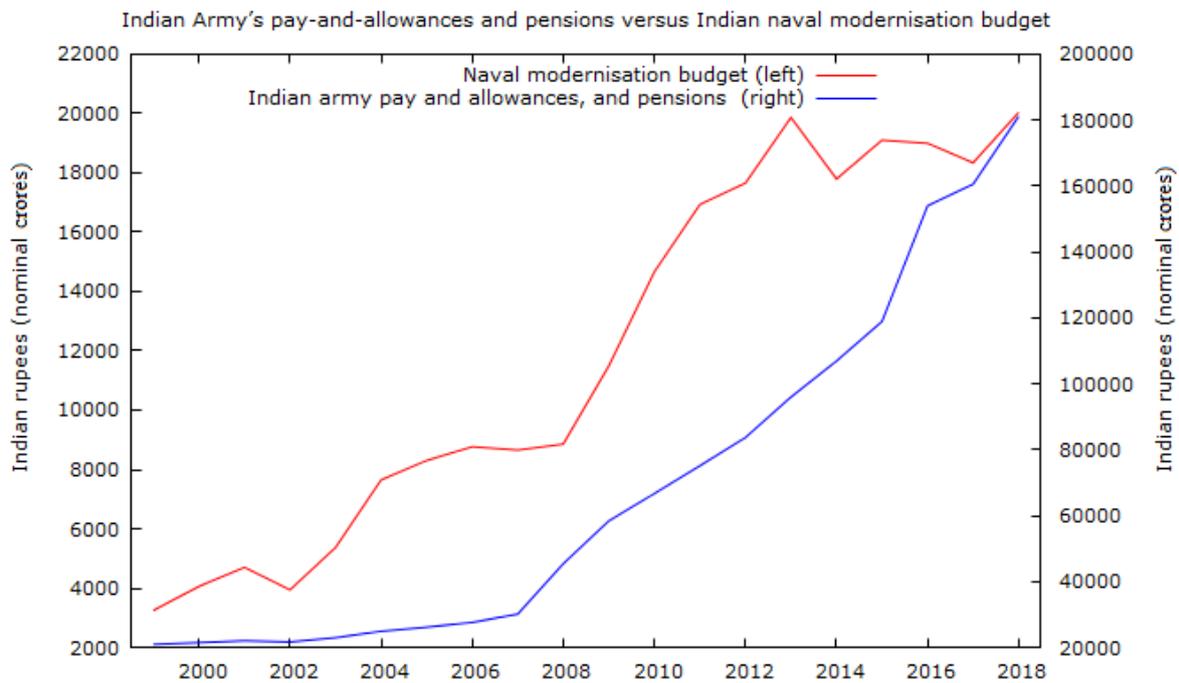


Figure 2: Indian Army’s pay-and-allowances and pensions versus Indian naval modernisation budget, 1999-2018

With the bulk of India’s defence budget tied up by the army’s revenue expenditure, the other two services have found themselves competing for the rest, with the navy suffering the most. In 2018, it accounted for only 27 percent of India’s military modernisation budget, with the significant majority of the rest going to replenishing the severely depleted Indian Air Force (Figure 3). Since 1999, the navy’s share of the modernisation budget has never exceeded 37 percent (in 2003) and has averaged just around 30 percent.

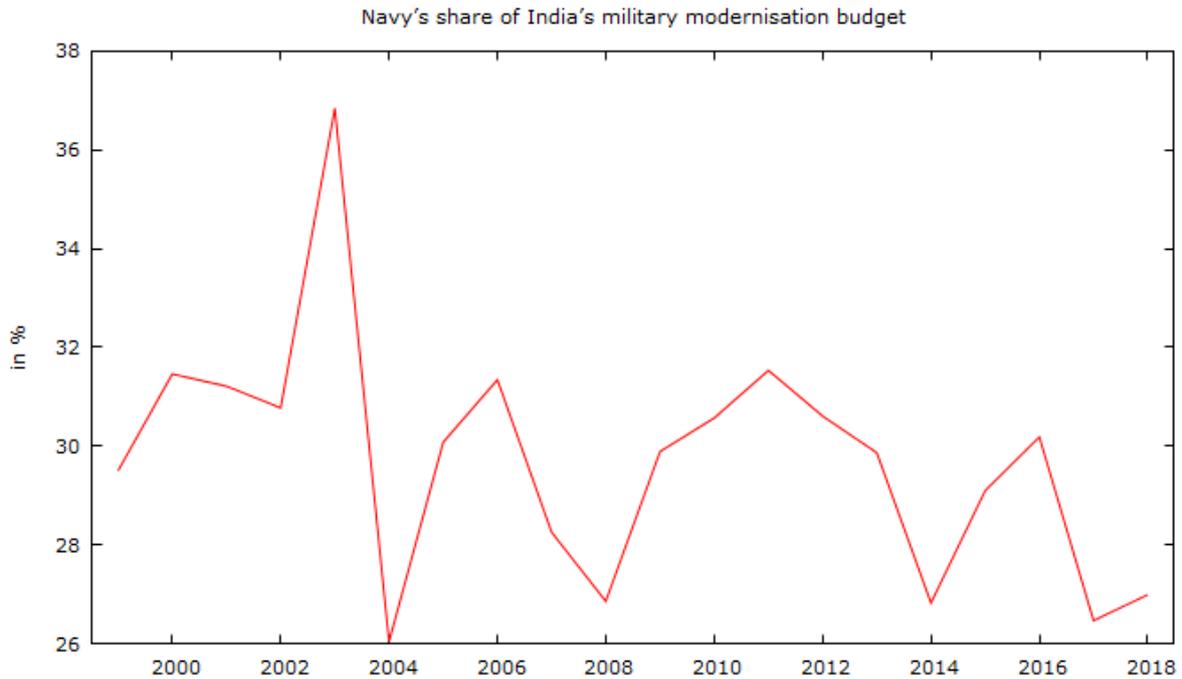


Figure 3: Navy's share of India's military modernisation budget, 1999-2018

One of the best ways to see the effect of India's middling commitment to naval modernisation is to look at three simple force ratios constructed out of data from the *IISS Military Balance* volumes from 2009 to 2018. Let us assume – modestly, and for simplicity – that the Chinese People's Liberation Army – Navy (PLA-N) will only deploy 30 percent of its tactical submarines, frigates, and destroyers in a military operation against India. The corresponding force ratios (that is, number of Chinese platforms of a given type to one Indian platform of that type multiplied by 0.3) are depicted in the graphs below.

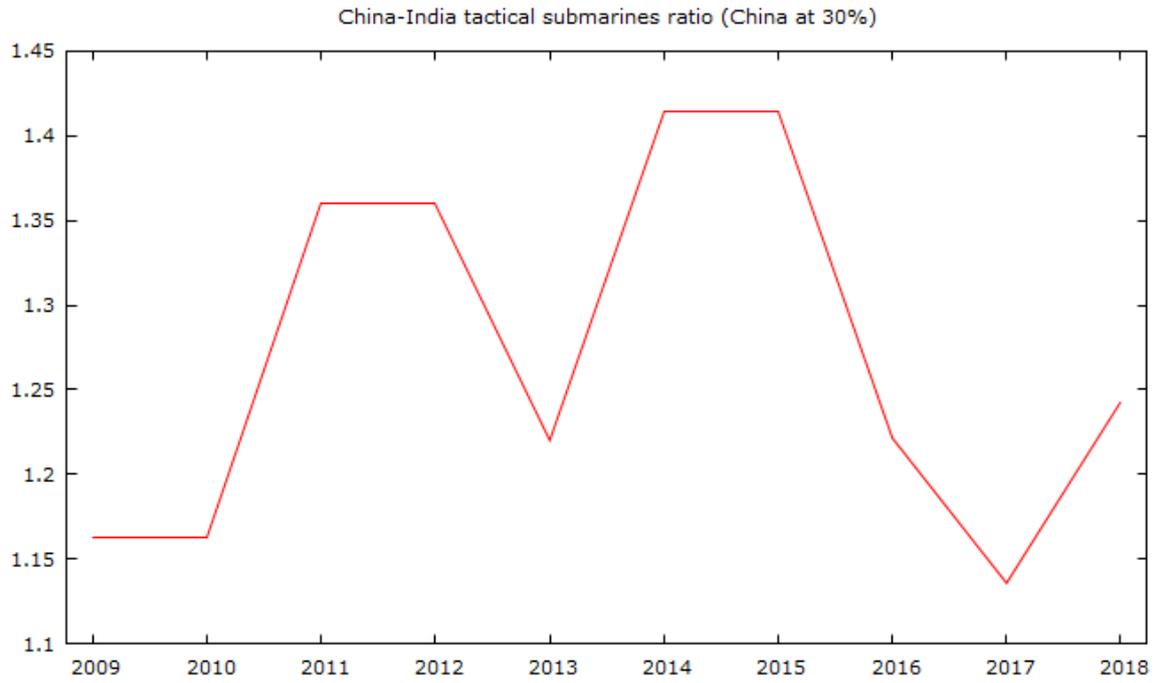


Figure 4: China-India tactical submarines ratio, 2009-2018

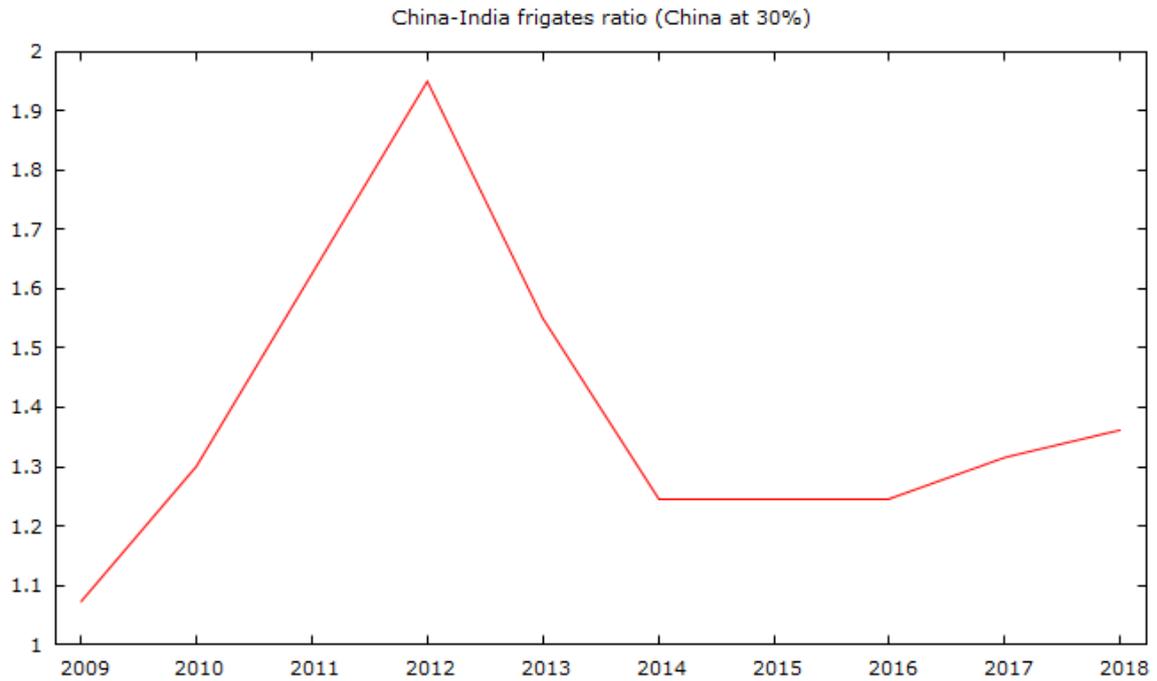


Figure 5: China-India frigates ratio, 2009-2018



Figure 6: China-India destroyers ratio, 2009-2018

Looking at **Figures 4, 5 and 6**, three trends emerge. First, even at a modest 30 percent deployment PLAN deployment level, the principal surface combatants (frigates and destroyers) trends are shifting in favour of China. Second, the apparent gains made by India here – pre-2011 for destroyers, and pre-2013 for frigates – are due to a Chinese drive to increase the quality of its combatants at the expense of retiring suboptimal platforms. As a [2015 US Office of Naval Intelligence report noted](#), the PLAN had retired several surface combatants with air defence capabilities with only a few kilometres range during those years in favour of ships that can operate “with increased confidence outside of shore-based air defence” – a hallmark of an expeditionary navy. Third and finally, when it comes to tactical submarines a very similar trend holds. The PLA-N is increasingly inducting nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) – including the lethal Type 93/Type 93A *Shang* class vessels – and decommissioning older legacy platforms. While China currently has nine SSNs, India has *one*: sole Russian-made *Akula*-class derivative, the INS *Chakra*.

All this is not to say that the Indian Navy – with the parameters of its severe budgetary constraints – has not made efforts to modernise its fleet in the recent years. The commissioning of three new stealth guided missile destroyers – the *Kolkata*-class – to the Indian Navy between 2014 and 2016 represents a key capability enhancement. Last year and in face of intense political pressure from the US to do otherwise, India placed a \$1 billion order for two additional upgraded stealth frigates from Russia: they will add to India's extant *Talwar*-class frigates fleet of six ships.

New Delhi also continues to seek to significantly increase the number of SSNs at its disposal. Last year, the Indian Navy indicated that construction of six such subsurface boats now have political clearance. But perhaps the most significant development for the Indian Navy over the past few years has come in form of logistics agreements with the United States (in 2016) and France (in 2018). Both allow Indian ships to dock and refuel at U.S. and French naval bases as a matter of routine, among other things. Buttressed by a commensurate growth in quality platforms, these agreements stand to significantly expand India's maritime reach.

Choices

If strategy is a matter of making of choices in face of shortage of resources – as Strachan pointed out in his 2013 essay – this becomes an imperative for India as it looks to the seas. And this is where the Indian Navy's expansive desire to do everything has proved to be an albatross around the neck of its acquisitions planning. The [2009 Indian Maritime Doctrine](#) (which, by design, guides the 2015 Maritime Strategy) notes as the navy's military missions, "Nuclear Second Strike, Maritime Domain Awareness, Sea Control, Sea Denial, Blockade, Power Projection, Force Protection, Expeditionary Ops, Compellance [*sic*], Destruction, SLOC Interdiction, SLOC Protection, Special Force Ops, Seaward Defence and Coastal and Offshore Defence."

Discounting the obvious redundancies in this laundry list of missions – given India’s maritime location sea denial, for example, would subsume SLOC interdiction, and conversely sea control would further SLOC protection – India is yet to choose between control and denial-driven strategies even though its acquisitions in the past have indicated a marked preference for sea control. (The difference between the two notions, roughly, is this. Sea *control* is a navy’s ability to operate in the sea uninterrupted without interference from the adversary. Sea *denial*, on the other hand, is denying the adversary the ability to operate in that sea without necessarily being able to do so yourself.)

Aircraft carriers are platforms of choice for navies aspiring to control the seas; the planes onboard can be effectively and flexibly used to negate any potential interference from enemy vessels. That said, India’s quest for the flattops has a long and chequered history. After decommissioning two carriers (the second in 2017), Delhi has been racing against time to induct its first indigenous aircraft carrier – the INS *Vikrant*.

But it is the saga of India’s sole operational flattop – INS *Vikramaditya* – that illustrates the travails of the country’s navy. The *Vikramaditya* is a *Kiev*-class aircraft carrier and was formerly in the service of the Soviet and then Russian navy. Acquired after significant modifications, the flattop was commissioned in 2013. With a price tag of more than \$4 billion (which included a large order for naval MiG-29s as the carrier’s air wing) it was the single-most expensive platform that India had ever purchased.

Even before it was operational, analysts pointed out the significant cost overruns between the 2004 signing of the India-Russia deal to acquire the platform and its delivery nine years later. But it is problems with the accompanying MiG-29Ks that has troubled the Indian Navy the most. Indian defence journalist [Manu Pubby notes](#) that “[i]n the past, there have been at least ten cases in which engine failures have occurred during flight, resulting in a landing with just

one functional engine. A recent audit report revealed that out of the 65 engines that India received from Russia for the fleet, at least 40 had to be rejected or withdrawn from service due to technical problems.” The latest episode in this sorry tale was last month when a fuel tank from a MiG-29K accidentally ejected, starting a fire in a civilian airport in Goa.

Meanwhile, recent reports indicate that the Indian Ministry of Defence is unwilling to fund the construction of a third aircraft carrier citing budgetary problems. (The planned third flattop – the INS *Vishal*, which the Indian Navy wants equipped with the US-designed ‘Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System’ catapult – is speculated to cost India around \$5 billion, or roughly 10 percent of its current defence budget.) Therefore, it is quite likely that India will remain a two-carrier navy for some time to come, with the Russian-made INS *Vikramaditya* and the under-construction indigenous INS *Vikrant*. This, in effect, means that India will have only one flattop on the sea at all times given the need to rotate them in and out of ports.

Given how prohibitively expensive aircraft carriers are, many analysts have found themselves asking why India seeks to pursue them to begin with, especially with the rise of sophisticated precision-strike munitions that makes flattops extremely vulnerable. [Australian National University’s David Brewster](#) calls India’s aircraft carriers the country’s “floating status symbols,” whose strategic value could be met with far cheaper alternatives such as developing India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands by way of establishing the “Bay of Bengal as a secure defensive space.” (Interestingly enough, Curzon in his 1909 Edinburgh lecture saw India’s potential in SLOC interdiction -- without calling it as such, of course -- noting that “on the high seas [*sic*] it commands the routes to Australia and to the China Seas.”) In response, Indian strategists such as former naval commander [Abhijit Singh](#) argue that pursuing a denial-based strategy, while undoubtedly cheaper, will be overtly militaristic and something “which would hurt India’s image as a largely benign military power.” Singh also makes the case such a choice

could interfere with India's ability to project power. This – to my mind, unlike the first argument – is unpersuasive.

First, as [Singh himself noted in another work](#), the Indian Navy does not have the political mandate to project power in China's backyard, the western Pacific or the China Seas to begin with. Therefore, until such time that the political class in New Delhi agrees to it, the question of power projection is moot. Second, China's sophisticated anti-access/area denial strategy in large swathes of that region imply that even if the Indian Navy was to enjoy the civilian clearance needed to needle China in its neighbourhood, it would be a choice that would come at a great risk. Unlike the United States' AirSea Battle or concepts derived from it, India lacks a clearly enunciated strategy to defeat Chinese denial complexes, effectively robbing flattops of strategic guidance around operations in extremely contested environments. In many ways, flattop proponents in India seem to view carriers essentially as weapons for political signalling, much along the lines of what Strachan argued many western navies have done since the end of the Cold War.

At the same time, India continues to aspire to be a leading power capable of shaping the Indo-Pacific security environment, much along the line of what Curzon, the former British Viceroy to India, had suggested more than a century ago. Such a power can hardly afford to be solely and aggressively defensive, cocooned in layers of denial complexes, as it advocates freedom and openness in the region with likeminded democracies. On the other hand, its continental compulsions – which Curzon also highlighted – along-with a continued nation-building-at-home project implies that budget-wise the navy's fortune is unlikely to change anytime soon.

The grand story of India's defence policy has always been that of mismatch between aspiration and capabilities. The story of the Indian Navy is but a case-in-point.
