



# Naval Competition in South Asia and the Limits of Confidence Building Measures

MAY 2026

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This paper was supported through a general core grant from the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

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Cover Photo: Press Conference Of DGMO Lt General Rajiv Ghai, DGAO Air Marshal AK Bharti, DGNO Vice Admiral AN Pramod On 'Operation Sindoor.' (Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

# NAVAL COMPETITION IN SOUTH ASIA AND THE LIMITS OF CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES

Sudarshan Shrikhande

## INTRODUCTION

Naval competition in South Asia is closely connected with the geostrategic realities in the region. In the sub-continent, this is especially so for India and Pakistan. They are maritime as well as continental neighbours who depend on the seas for much of their imported energy needs and almost all their external trade. Sea lines of communications (SLOCs) are vital for them individually at all times, but even more so the protection of one's own sea lines and being able to disrupt the other's lines in times of conflict. Further, both have nuclear weapons. India now has a growing nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet while Pakistan seems to be on the threshold of deploying shorter range nuclear-tipped cruise missiles with their planned inductions of Chinese conventional submarines.

This paper argues that within the sub-continent, India's situation is more complex than for many other countries. From India's perspective, there have been two ever-present geo-strategically significant factors affecting its maritime strategy – Pakistan and China. They are not only continental neighbours, but Pakistan is an immediate maritime neighbour and China is a *de facto* maritime neighbour. It examines the maritime and continental conundrum that Indian statecraft has to deal with. To this complexity, one should also add the deep China-Pakistan relationship. This is a decades-old partnership that is in many ways closer, more coherent and likely to be more enduring than some of the “special relationships” between the United States and its formal allies, including the United Kingdom.

In focusing on the maritime security environment, the paper considers escalation scenarios from the South Asian naval competition in the nuclear as well as conventional dimensions. It examines three related questions: whether these scenarios are likely to be further complicated by emerging technologies; do existing confidence building measures address likely concerns in the maritime domain and also could other confidence building measures (CBMs) be developed for the South Asian maritime domain?

It also looks at larger issues of leadership consistencies and inconsistencies, and the political drivers for particular diplomatic-military behaviour that have much greater influence than the relatively fragile guardrails that CBMs provide.

## THE GEO-STRATEGIC CONUNDRUM IN SOUTH ASIA

### *A Short Retrospective and Implications*

Since 1947, India and Pakistan have engaged in multiple major conflicts (1947-48, 1965, 1971) and localised clashes like the 1999 Kargil War. More recently, a four-day conflict in May 2025 saw India retaliate against cross-border terrorism (called Operation Sindoor) following a targeted attack on tourists in Pahalgam. The Indian government, under Prime Minister Modi, has adopted a "hardening" policy, holding the Pakistani government directly accountable for the actions of terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup>

The other ever-present, geo-strategically very significant factor for India is China. The 1962 China-India border war remains a defining moment in India-China relations, resulting in China's occupation of Aksai Chin (approx. 38,000 sq. km). Since then, Beijing has consistently maintained territorial claims across the Himalayan border, stretching from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh and uses varying diplomatic and military tactics to keep the pressure on India.<sup>2</sup> This has included border skirmishes, intrusions and fortifications. The maritime nature of its expansive claims in the South and East China Seas are not principally different from the Himalayan assertions it prefers and practices using analogical pressure.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the deep strategic congruence and cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing is an increasing – not decreasing – concern for New Delhi. It is somewhat akin to Germany's concerns before both World Wars of a two-front strategic conundrum.<sup>4</sup> Both Pakistan and China are effective naval powers. For Pakistan, its proximity and the availability of its "fort and fleet" in a joint way is exceeded by its partner China's "fort and fleet" which is also potentially able to exert influence and effects over the northern Indian Ocean. For India, land neighbours who are quite strong, quite inimical and hardly quiet about their disputes, are also the ones who cannot be disregarded in the maritime domain.

- From the brief retrospective some inferences can be derived: It could be said that with the fraught relationship with the two large continental as well as maritime neighbours, and occasional cracks in the relationship with some other neighbours,

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<sup>1</sup> "India's hardening policies towards terrorism and Pakistan," IISS, June 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2025/06/indias-hardening-policies-towards-terrorism-and-pakistan/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vijay Gokhale, *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India* (Penguin, 2021), 131-152.

<sup>3</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, "Beati Sunt Possidente: Blessed are Those in Possession; A Leitmotif for Pakistani and Chinese Statecraft," Vivekananda International Foundation, April 10, 2017, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/april/10/beati-sunt-possidentes-blessed-are-those-in-possession>.

<sup>4</sup> In both, wars, France and Russia were continental or close-continental neighbours and Britain was a major maritime neighbour as well as a near-continental adversary bound in an alliance in World War 1 with France and Russia. In World War 2, Hitler was astute in arranging a no-war pact with the Soviets a few days before attacking Poland to avoid a two-front war. His later decisions to invade the USSR and to declare war on the US made it a multi-front problem with serious consequences.

Indian statecraft has its challenges. The ever-present difficulties and ups and downs of the neighbourhood cause India no comfort. Such difficulties, in reality, result in India often feeling boxed-in.<sup>5</sup>

- Inferring from the geopolitical context, the major geo-strategic problems for India are actually continental, while the major geo-economic future and prosperity are enabled by the maritime dimension. Such a conundrum is not always understood clearly by many other nations.<sup>6</sup>
- China has a somewhat similar strategic challenge. It has some inimical land neighbours, India being among them; and the Russian Federation, with a currently friendly relationship but with past tensions and perhaps future troubles.<sup>7</sup> It has the United States as an adversary with its other “maritime” allies which are close neighbours of China separated by narrower bodies of water along its Pacific coast. These neighbours have their own “fort and fleets.”

Therefore, unlike for the United States and the former Soviet Union, or for the US-China, or Australia and China, to name a few, an “INCSEA” (Prevention of Incidents at Sea Agreement) framework cannot be separated from – to coin a term – “INCLAND” (Prevention of Incidents on Land) problem in South Asia. The US-USSR INCSEA is well-known and well-documented. It was signed in 1972 by admirals from each side.<sup>8</sup> Its clauses, and parameters have indeed formed a basis for other such agreements including in the India-Pakistan case.<sup>9</sup> However, at that time in the early 1970s, there were no simultaneous and equivalent INCLAND agreements between the two superpowers that catered for border management or skirmishes. However, and importantly, at the nuclear threat-reduction levels they had other arrangements, of course beginning with the small step of a “hotline” after the Cuban Missile Crisis. An INCLAND type of document was executed much later with the Prevention of

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<sup>5</sup> Anushka Saxena, “Mediation and Interference Assessing Chinese Views & Analyses on the Latest India-Pakistan Tensions,” Takshashila Institution, May 2025, <https://takshashila.org.in/content/publications/assets/mediation-interference-chinese-views-india-pakistan.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> It has been contended by this author in other papers and in conferences that the United States became a virtual island only after the US civil War and after Mexico – a Spanish colony – was subdued. With relatively small and peaceful neighbours like Canada and Mexico, and oceans on either coast, the United States no longer has the conundrum it had. The history of its war for Independence, War of 1812, and the Civil War (1860-1864) were mainly continental struggles. Likewise, Australia and the UK have had moats of differing width. Japan is an island, but its major security concerns come from a near-maritime neighbour, China, who also is a major maritime power. The Republic of Korea (ROK) has a conundrum somewhat like India’s.

<sup>7</sup> Shrikhande, “Beati Sunt Possidentes.”

<sup>8</sup> This was also the year in which the two superpowers began the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (called SALT I) and signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

<sup>9</sup> US Department of State, “Agreement Between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas,” accessed March 4, 2026, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/4791.htm>

Dangerous Military Activities Agreement (PDMAA) of 1989.<sup>10</sup> An important point to note here is that such a treaty could be signed only at the waning end of the Cold War. In fact, it can be said that the Communist regime in Poland had fallen just a week prior to the INCSEA. Serious fears existed in the West and in the USSR as well, that a potentially consequential military incident could be triggered inadvertently since large Soviet air and ground troops were stationed in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. NATO member countries bordering the Warsaw Pact countries and the USSR in continental Europe before 1989 did have concerns of conflict, including occasional incidents of asylum seekers crossing and consequences of tensions that could arise from heavily patrolled borders. However, border skirmishes, like those between India and China or cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, did not exist in comparable form. To that extent, it is actually quite commendable that India-Pakistan and India-China have had INCLAND type of agreements and protocols despite having gone to war. In present times, however, the US-Russia and the US-China tensions put into doubt questions of stability, because some of the very same CBMs that brought stability in their relations are now either defunct or have been abolished.<sup>11</sup>

## SEA-BASED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN SOUTHERN ASIA

Pakistan and India have been *de facto* nuclear weapon states since May 1998 when they carried out their respective nuclear tests. India's declared nuclear doctrine envisages a framework of deterrence based on a triad. New Delhi's larger task is to maintain credible minimum deterrence against China as well as Pakistan. China, of course also has a triad; and Pakistan seems to be on the threshold of moving from a nuclear dyad (land-based and air-based) to a sea-based ability to deploy smaller cruise missiles in conventional submarines. Specifically for purposes of this paper, Chinese deployment of its ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in the Indian Ocean could be ruled out at least for the foreseeable future, not because it cannot, but it need not. It has adequate vectors of land-based missiles and manned bombers for its own deterrence vis-à-vis India. It is likely to prioritise its sea-based vectors towards the United States (and even possibly

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<sup>10</sup>United Nations, "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and United States of America: Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities (with Annexes and Agreed Statements). Signed at Moscow on 12 June 1989," June 12 1989,

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201566/volume-1566-I-27309-English.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Vibhu Mishra, "UN chief warns of 'grave moment' as final US-Russia nuclear arms treaty expires," United Nations, February 4, 2026.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1166892#:~:text=By%20Vibhu%20Mishra,ballistic%20missiles%20and%20heavy%20bombers>. There are at the same time several points of tension in the US-China relationship that include Taiwan, trade, Chinese claims in the South and East China Seas and China's growing power itself. For instance, see, Phelim Kine, "China-US Relations Could Fracture in 2026," *Politico*, December 26, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/12/26/china-u-s-relations-could-fracture-2026-00703020>

Although the US is itself disregarding earlier nuclear restraints, it does express concerns about the Chinese nuclear arsenal's growth, although not mentioned in this reference.

Russia). In any case, its longer range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) could target India even from the South China Sea.<sup>12</sup>

### *Indian Developments*

A matter that devolves to the maritime dimension of nuclear stability is manifesting itself in the way India is developing its sea-based nuclear deterrent (SBND). Currently two SSBNs carrying nuclear SLBMs are in commission and media reports suggest that two or three more may be operational in the next few years.<sup>13</sup> Given the greater stealth that such submarines have compared to other nuclear vectors, it is a truism that the maritime leg of the triad may be the most important contributor to deterrence stability by creating a more survivable second-strike retaliatory capability. This is felt to be so by Russia, the United States, France and China besides India. Due to greater potential survivability of the maritime leg of such triads, much of nuclear vector reductions have happened in land-based missiles and in aircraft-deliverable bombs.<sup>14</sup> India's logic in developing SSBNs has been extensively examined by this writer in his research.<sup>15</sup> It is likely to have CASD in due course perhaps with an additional surge capability when considered necessary. It would need to significantly bolster its strategic defensive anti-submarine warfare (SDASW) capabilities to increase the security with which its SSBNs can operate to stabilise deterrence with a phrase the writer introduced in previous research, "to deploy operationally, survive tactically and launch strategically."<sup>16</sup> The efficacy of nuclear deterrence requires one's own will to launch weapons in a second-strike and impact an adversary's urge to reach for the nuclear button first. This, in turn, requires India to enhance its strategic offensive ASW (SOASW) capability to keep tabs on the Pakistani Navy's capability to launch low-yield nuclear missiles from sea.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, "Atoms for Peace? India's SSBN Fleet and Nuclear Deterrence," in *The Future of the Undersea Deterrent: A Global Survey*, ed. Rory Medcalf, (Australian National University National Security College, 2020), pp:39-42.

<sup>13</sup> Ayush Pandey, "Arihant, Arighaat, Aridhaman: Inside India's growing nuclear submarine triad against China, Pakistan," *Times of India*, February 23, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/defence/news/arihant-arighaat-aridhaman-inside-indias-growing-nuclear-submarine-triad-against-china-pakistan/articleshow/128710555.cms>

<sup>14</sup> The United Kingdom has a monad (*i.e.* just the SBND consisting of four SSBNs of which one is on constant patrol) in what is called Continuous-at-sea-deterrent (CASD).<sup>14</sup> France does not have land-based nuclear missiles and has a major component in the "throw-weight" of its SLBMs in SSBNs on CASD and a smaller quantum that air-launches bombs.

<sup>15</sup> This section utilises from this author's as yet unpublished PHD Thesis. It is entitled *India's Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrence: Criticality and Effectiveness for Deterrence Stability*. The PHD was awarded by Mumbai university on June 16, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Shrikhande, "Atoms for Peace?"

<sup>17</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, "Making India's sea power formidable and future-ready," *ORF Occasional Paper* 152, April 27, 2018, [https://www.orfonline.org/research/making-indias-sea-power-formidable-and-future-ready#:~:text=Strategic%20offensive%20ASW%20\(SO%20Anti,necessary%20during%20a%20conventional%20conflict](https://www.orfonline.org/research/making-indias-sea-power-formidable-and-future-ready#:~:text=Strategic%20offensive%20ASW%20(SO%20Anti,necessary%20during%20a%20conventional%20conflict)

## *Pakistani Developments*

Two aspects for Pakistan may be briefly examined here. The first is its own plans for a SBND based on conventional attack submarines (SSKs).<sup>18</sup> This is likely to be via a tube-launched cruise missile, reportedly the designated Babur-3 sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM). The Pakistani nuclear establishment set up the Naval Strategic Forces Command, a maritime component in 2012.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that some or all of the eight Chinese-designed *Hangor/Yuan Type 039B*-class conventional submarines, equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP), will be armed with the Babur-3 SLCMs.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, while submarine-launched nuclear missiles existed in the 1980s until their withdrawal in 1991, at the end of the Cold War, there were moves to revive the practice.<sup>21</sup> Pakistan's growing fleet of submarines would likely create pressure on the Indian Navy to operate under a considerable conventional submarine threat *plus* a nuclear threat against land targets as well as vital fleet formations. The second aspect is the concern that India feels about a lowering of the nuclear threshold for four important reasons:

- First, that a combat load of conventional land attack as well as nuclear missiles could lead to real command and control problems. Of course, one would not expect a navy to admit this could be an issue; certainly, the Pakistan Navy and the Pakistani nuclear-establishment would not. However, both these variants of missiles have different fusing and arming technology and protocols and of course, entirely different purposes.<sup>22</sup> As an analogy, let us try and imagine an air force combat aircraft – assuming that it is large enough – deployed for both conventional as well as nuclear bombing with different bombs/missiles in its payload for the same sortie.

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<sup>18</sup> Said Tasleem, "Pakistan's Nuclear Capabilities and Prospects for Sea-Based Deterrence," in *Future of Undersea Deterrent: A Global Survey*, ed. Rory Medcalf (Australian National University National Security College, 2020), pp: 43-47, [https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/the\\_future\\_of\\_the\\_undersea\\_deterrent.pdf#page=55](https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/the_future_of_the_undersea_deterrent.pdf#page=55)

<sup>19</sup> Bashir Ali Abbas, "Surface Tension: The Need for Risk Reduction Among Emerging Naval Nuclear Forces in South Asia," Stimson Center, December 11, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/surface-tension-the-need-for-risk-reduction-among-emerging-naval-nuclear-forces-in-south-asia/>

<sup>20</sup> Said Tasleem, "Pakistan's Nuclear Capabilities", p.45.

<sup>21</sup> Congress.gov. "Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCMN)," Jan 08, 2026. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12084>. For instance, in the First Trump Presidency, the thinking on bringing back modernised versions of the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile- Nuclear (TLAM-N) gained momentum. In a recent report, several aspects of the process are discussed as well as points of debate flagged.

<sup>22</sup> Ravi Ganesh, "SSBNs destabilising? Not if command and control is maintained," The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, August, 12, 2014, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/ssbns-destablising-not-if-command-control-maintained>.

- Second, under tactical pressure of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) by an adversary (say, India), submarine captains may feel themselves under pressure to launch a SLCM either at a formation or against another target on land.
- Third, and, most important is the predilection of Pakistani leadership to rattle their nuclear sabres so frequently and quite casually. For instance, Abdul Basit, former Pakistani Ambassador in New Delhi recently said, while considering a hypothetical case of the United States wanting to attack Pakistan, “If the US attacks Pakistan and we cannot reach their bases in the Gulf or strike Israel, then what would be our only option? India,” he said.<sup>23</sup> Rash statements from leadership and spokespeople contribute to tensions, increased actions and instability. This is seen, to cite recent examples, in and from Tel Aviv, Washington DC as well as Tehran.<sup>24</sup>
- Fourth, and as much of a concern is that the nuclear command authority in Islamabad is *de facto* the Pakistani military establishment and not quite the Prime Minister. India, and the world cannot ignore this, and it should worry them.<sup>25</sup> Article 27 of the Constitutional amendment only furthers concerns. Military commanders at the tactical level are generally trained to use maximum force that is available to them. It makes sense but also creates ambiguities and risks.

## CBMs IN SOUTHERN ASIA

### *Nuclear CBMs in Southern Asia*

In the India-Pakistan dynamics of nuclear deterrence, there are a few overarching aspects of nuclear CBMs. Given the long history of animosity, tension and conflicts, it is both interesting and creditable that the two continental and maritime neighbours have

<sup>23</sup> “We’ll Bomb Delhi, Mumbai If US Target Our Nukes’: Pakistan’s Former Envoy to India,” *First Post*, March 22, 2026, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-could-be-pakistans-only-option-if-attacked-by-us-or-israel-says-ex-envoy-abdul-basit-13991875.html>

<sup>24</sup> Amanda Castro et al., “Iran War Updates: Six Troops Killed As Trump Says War Will Be Over When ‘I Feel It in My Bones’,” *Newsweek*, March 13, 2026, [https://www.newsweek.com/iran-war-latest-updates-live-donald-trump-warning-11671032?utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_source=Facebook#Echobox=1773391081](https://www.newsweek.com/iran-war-latest-updates-live-donald-trump-warning-11671032?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook#Echobox=1773391081). For Iran, Priyanka Shankar, “Why Are Iranian Leaders Sending Mixed Messages on Gulf Attacks?,” *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/8/why-are-iranian-leaders-sending-mixed-messages-on-gulf-attacks#:~:text=According%20to%20Iranian%20state%20media,to%20countries%20in%20the%20region>.

<sup>25</sup> Rahul Rawat and Shivam Shekhawat, “Pakistan’s Nuclear Command and Control Post Sindoor,” *Observer Research Foundation*, February 23, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pakistan-nuclear-command-and-control-post-operation-sindoor#:~:text=Figure%201:%20The%20National%20Command, strategic%20authority%20over%20nuclear%20weapons>.

taken steps towards addressing some tensions through safeguards even before they tested nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup>

Western diplomats, observers and scholars may think that the intractability of the India-Pakistan relationship is marked by an absence of talks and contact. This is, however, not be correct. In an book, intriguingly titled “Anger Management,” former Indian diplomat, Ajay Bisaria, explains that attempts have been made by both sides throughout the decades to talk and diffuse issues. This continued till Mr Modi’s initial period as the Prime Minister.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, compare this with the US-Cuba animosity since 1959. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States placed and removed Cuba from the “Terrorism” list a couple of times; imposed many sanctions and fresh threats to Cuba. In fact, Cuba had not attacked the United States even when the Soviets did cause a huge crisis by locating nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962, when the United States had legitimate concerns about a close Soviet/Russian partner across a small gap of sea. Diplomatic relations were established between the United States and Cuba only in 2015. In contrast, despite far more serious differences and a protruded history of conflict between India and Pakistan, there have been talks and specific CBMs, between the two countries.

There are no existing CBMs between the two countries in the nuclear domain either and none seem to be in the pipeline. China’s growing arsenal and its nuclear and defence security relationship with Pakistan certainly are concerns for India as they are for much of the world.<sup>28</sup>

### *India-China Maritime CBMs*

Before examining India-Pakistan CBMs in the maritime dimension, it is useful to look at India-China CBMs. Firstly, there are no CBMs between India and China for the maritime domain and understandably so because the two nations do not have maritime “borders” to contend with. However, India and China have a set of INCLAND CBMs dating from the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA) of 1993; the 1996 “Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas;” a third in 2005 with a long title, “Protocol on

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<sup>26</sup> A 2025 Report authored by Hely Desai for the Council for Strategic and Defence Research (CSDR) traces the history, beginning with the 1988 agreement that prohibited attacks against nuclear installations and facilities; advanced notification of ballistic missile tests in 2005 and in 2007 about reducing risk from accidents relating to nuclear weapons, See: Hely Desai, “Modernizing India-Pakistan Nuclear and Conventional CBMs: A Strategic Imperative,” Council for Strategic and Defence Research, 2025, <https://csdronline.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Modernizing-India-Pakistan-Nuclear-and-Conventional-CBMs-1.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Ajay Bisaria, *Anger Management: The Troubled Diplomatic Relationship Between India and Pakistan* (Aleph Book Company, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Kartik Bommakanti, “China’s Expanding Nuclear Capabilities: Implications for India’s Response,” *Observer Research Foundation*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-s-expanding-nuclear-capabilities-implications-for-india-s-response>

Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas”. This was followed by the “working mechanism for consultation and coordination on India-China border affairs”, the WMCC in 2012.<sup>29</sup> There are other steps like the Corps Commanders’ meetings of which the 23<sup>rd</sup> round was held in October 2025. This is mentioned here to underline the fundamentally continental nature of the problem. Possible future friction that could occur due to Beijing-Islamabad axis, if it manifests itself significantly in the maritime domain, could lead to maritime CBMs between China and India because of the land-oriented measures that exist. Also, given such INCLAND CBMs, it would be expected that if issues arise like they did between non-maritime neighbours like the United States and USSR in the 1970s, New Delhi and Beijing would be able to handle such friction. CBMs may not prevent skirmishes like the Galwan violence of June 2020, but existing CBMs may enable matters to cool-off or at least be managed to an extent as did happen.

### *India-Pakistan Maritime CBMs*

Given the background and reality of the deeper, fundamental schisms and history of conflicts and tensions between India and Pakistan, there have been temptations for the Pakistani Navy to push the envelope via minor incidents. However, these have not resulted in any damage to any units thus far, but do violate good order at sea. In turn, Indian Navy ships have also at times taken robust counter-actions or got close to Pakistani Navy ships exercising at sea. Bashir Abbas describes some of these incidents.<sup>30</sup> It is here that it can be said that both navies and coast guards (Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (MSA) vessels and aircraft) have adhered to the spirit of the maritime CBMs. A notable incident of the Pakistani Navy testing the limits was the shooting down of its Atlantique maritime patrol aircraft by Indian Air Force interceptors on 10 August 1999 (soon after the Kargil conflict was had ended) when it violated Indian airspace.<sup>31</sup> The continuing role that radicalisation of the Pakistani establishment and its supported terrorist groups, has manifested itself in using the maritime medium for attacks in India as did happen in Mumbai on 26 November 2008 (often called 26/11).<sup>32</sup> Despite this, both sides have recognised the benefits of

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<sup>29</sup> Joshi Manoj, “Indo-China row signals breakdown of confidence building measures,” *Observer Research Foundation*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indo-china-row-signals-breakdown-of-confidence-building-measures-67469>

<sup>30</sup> Abbas, “Surface Tension: The Need for Risk Reduction Among Emerging Naval Nuclear Forces in South Asia.”

<sup>31</sup> Snehes Alex Philip, “How IAF shot down a Pakistani naval aircraft and killed 16 a month after Kargil in 1999,” *The Print*, June 12, 2019, <https://theprint.in/past-forward/how-iaf-shot-down-a-pakistani-naval-aircraft-and-killed-16-a-month-after-kargil-in-1999/248868>

<sup>32</sup> Liam Collins et al., “Case Study #16 – Mumbai,” Modern War Institute, November 26, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/urban-warfare-project-case-study-16-mumbai-terrorist-attacks/>. Also see, Azmat Khan, “New Evidence of Pakistan’s Role in the Mumbai Attacks?,” *Frontline*, June 28, 2012, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/new-evidence-of-pakistans-role-in-the-mumbai-attacks/>

bilateral CBMs, notwithstanding the fraught relationship. In fact, there do exist India-Pakistan maritime CBMs that predate India-China CBMs and others that pertain to even the nuclear domain.

Maritime CBMs could be said to evolve from earlier measures such as the hotlines established between the two Army HQs Directors of Military Operations (DMO, later called Director General MO (DGMO)) in 1965—two years after the US-USSR teletype hotline. There were two agreements in 1991. We could say these were combined “INCLAND/INCSEA” agreements and perhaps the drafters did see the continental-maritime links and had already acknowledged the nuclear dimension as well. One was on advance notifications of exercises, troop movements with their own qualifiers about time, space, forces, and more. This document includes clauses that lay down issues about notifications of naval exercises and some limits of holding these and maintaining some distance from each other. The other was to prevent airspace violations and to facilitate overflights. There were other small steps and publicised visits as part of the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding between India and Pakistan of February 1999, but that broke down following by the incursions into Kargil in 1999 and the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. In all, there is a slew of CBMs available and the ones in the maritime arena have generally been observed by both sides.

### *Hotlines*

Following the 1971 War, a dedicated hotline was instituted between the Indian and Pakistani Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) as a key pillar of the bilateral military CBMs. The hotline was updated in 1999, as part of the historic Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which established a broad framework for CBMs between the two countries. The Lahore MoU also put in place a nuclear “hotline between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan, but whether this communication channel is used is not entirely known. A second India-Pakistan military-to-military hotline exists between the ICG and Pakistan’s MSA that keeps them in touch about issues with fishermen, search and rescue and any other problem in the proximate littoral. There is no such hotline between the Indian and Pakistani navies. Given the tensions in the land domain and the oft-vexed political-diplomatic relationship, the two navies have not had any serious incidents at sea unlike between the United States and Soviet navies.

On the matter of “hotlines,” one wonders what “modernisation of CBMs” would entail? Indeed, communication links could be made more cyber-resistant perhaps. More hotlines, however, may not be a good idea. First, the hotline between DGMOs and CGHQ/HQMSA sometimes serve the narrower purpose of discussing information or even intentions for small scale border/coastal waters issues. Anything of greater significance is almost always likely to be after deliberations of the Cabinet Committee of Security and the Joint Chiefs on the Indian side. On the Pakistani side it may depend on who calls the shots in that period. The DGMOs or duty officers thereafter convey to

the other side and either receive an immediate response or perhaps agreement to call back. Setting up of too many “hotlines” could be problematic as it can become a case of ‘crossed wires.’ A recommendation here is to consider establishing an apex hotline whenever an Indian Joint Force Headquarters is set up, preferably in a physically more sheltered place, as one imagines national command posts would be in major countries. This channel could then take up the ‘heavy stuff’ of issues that require higher level engagement or are responses from higher levels. The ICG-MSA and the DGMO channels could be retained.<sup>33</sup>

## **POTENTIAL ESCALATION-AT-SEA SCENARIOS AND THE CHALLENGE FOR MARITIME CBMs**

### *Nuclear Risks, “Sabre-Rattling” and Casual Attitudes to Nuclear Weapon Usage*

Before examining potential escalation-at-sea scenarios, it is useful to examine some larger issues of nuclear risks and of submarine operations. At the apex level, concerns about nuclear risks at sea will always be paramount. This is because upholding nuclear deterrence is an enduring necessity despite the challenges of periodic instability. One can argue that the larger problem in nuclear risk may not be in not having sufficient or adequately “modernised” CBMs – as many scholars and commentators feel – but rather the tendency of political and military leaders to rattle nuclear sabres from time to time.<sup>34</sup>

For a long time, nuclear posturing and nuclear threats have been a preference for Pakistani leadership. This needs some elaboration because the acquisition of a SBND capability by Pakistan with eight SSKs with AIP and nuclear-tipped cruise missiles could be unsettling and fraught with risks. Ambassador Basit’s outrageous statement mentioned earlier may be that of an individual, but yet cannot be ignored because he has company in Pakistan. The statement made by Field Marshal Munir during an earlier, official visit to the United States further illustrates this and is mentioned below in the paper.

The uneasy and largely vulnerable elected civilian government has for much of Pakistan’s history, either been in the sidelines with the Army in charge, or has been under pressure from the Army. For its part, the Army seems to have *de facto* control of the nuclear architecture apart from ordaining the survivability or dismissal of a government. Add to this the widespread governmental and non-governmental support of terrorism as an external instrument even as it suffers from the internal impact of precisely such preferences. In many ways military officers who have been involved in the nuclear architecture in that country have worked in the Strategic Plans Division, sometimes for several years. Even after a formal exit from this key organisation, some

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<sup>33</sup> Abbas, “Surface Tension.”

<sup>34</sup> Barshir Ali. See also, Desai, “Modernizing India-Pakistan Nuclear and Conventional CBMs: A Strategic Imperative.”

of its ‘alumni’ remain active as well as connected with the nuclear forces community. There also are regular examples of their nuclear sabre-rattling, and this cannot quite be disregarded by the global community because nuclear threats cannot be dismissed lightly at least until a better circumstantial evaluation is done. An example from a few years back is that of the oft quoted and invited Lieutenant General Kidwai.<sup>35</sup> More recently, the newly promoted Field Marshal Munir, quite inarguably currently the most important man in Pakistan, while on an official visit to the United States, spoke in Florida (also visiting the US Central Command Commander) at a Pakistani expatriates-hosted dinner. What he said is seriously alarming: “We are a nuclear nation. If we are going down, we will take half the world down with us.”<sup>36</sup>

### *The Larger Problem with “Tactical Nukes” at Sea*

In the maritime sphere, there is an additional issue using submarines with low-yield nuclear warheads to those listed above that has the potential of serious nuclear risks. They are an even more difficult part of the command and control (C2) chain but with the stricture that submarines are chary – for good reason – on communicating with shore authorities. It is essentially a one-way channel for them. Thus, say a large howitzer or artillery gun that can fire a nuclear shell or an engineer battalion that can lay a nuclear mine, would normally be able to be in two-way touch with those upwards in the C2 chain. Submarines would not do that because usually it would be ill-advised. The risk of rash use, or inability to receive urgent cancellation of firing orders for nuclear weapons in SSKs/SSNs may be higher than for SSBNs.

This is thought to be so because SSBNs are exercised and deployed for the single purpose of upholding deterrence through readiness. The crew is deeply trained, single-minded and for this single purpose with dual/ triple safeguards – physical and electronic – as one imagines, would exist for SLBMs on SSBNs. This author’s formulation, “to deploy operationally, survive tactically and launch strategically” works well for SSBNs but cannot for SSKs or SSNs with nuclear as well as conventional weapons and tasking. It has also been his contention that the proper, albeit less ‘attractive’ term for, such weapons is low-yield nuclear weapons.<sup>37</sup> Their use – even of one warhead – could alter a war/conflict very quickly in strategic terms and may have pan-regional or even global escalatory effects. This points to fundamentally different doctrinal and strategic approaches by India and Pakistan. Abbas brings this out well in the Stimson Center paper:

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<sup>35</sup> Arun Sahgal et al., “Pakistan’s New Nuclear Strategy Is a Crisis in the Making,” *The National Interest*, July 15, 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/pakistans-new-nuclear-strategy-crisis-making-206646>

<sup>36</sup> Anna Majhar Barducci, “Pakistan’s Army Chief Sparks Alarm with Nuclear Threats on U.S. Soil,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, September 11, 2025, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/pakistans-army-chief-sparks-alarm-with-nuclear-threats-on-u-s-soil/>

<sup>37</sup> Sahgal et al., “Pakistan’s New Nuclear Strategy Is a Crisis in the Making.”

*‘...the (SSBN) as a platform for deterrence rather than warfighting applies more to India than to Pakistan because of New Delhi’s nuclear doctrine. The Indian doctrine ascribes a deterring role to India’s nuclear weapons through a policy of No First Use and “massive retaliation” to cause “unacceptable damage” through counter-value targeting in case of an attack...using weapons of mass destruction. For Pakistan, which attributes both a deterring and warfighting role to its nuclear arsenal (through a policy of “full-spectrum deterrence”), a conventionally powered nuclear armed submarine (SSGK, for the purposes of this article) cannot be ruled out.’<sup>38</sup>*

### *Likelihood of Incidents at Sea*

Given the growing number of submarines of the Indian and Pakistan navies, possible deployments of uncrewed surface and sub-surface vessels, underwater signature similarities in the Pakistani and Chinese submarines of the *Yuan* class, plus the likelihood of many more ships and submarines of other navies that may visit/operate/transit the Northern IOR, add up to the complexities of operational considerations. The surface environment would also become more complex, but all-round improved MDA, both navies are going to have a better idea of each other’s deployments, exercises, and more. CBMs covering them and for operating aircraft have been seen to be adequate since the early 1990s. Good order may continue to be maintained on the surface where the parameters laid out by CBMs. There may be the occasional infringement and close quarter- situations. Overall professionalism and seamanship/airmanship at and over the sea might prevent anything becoming too serious and escalatory. Submarine commanders, one supposes, would need to be very alert and go about their peacetime operational tasking with very high tactical professionalism and consciousness of the increasing complexity. For their part, the Pakistani Navy would need to be very cognisant of the “unwisdom” and risks of loading nuclear weapons in their SSKs or even onboard ships.<sup>39</sup>

### *Submarine and ASW Operations*

In linking submarine operations to the need for CBMs, a few realities have to be kept in mind. Submarines derive their value from stealth. AIP and nuclear propulsion (itself a near-perfect form of AIP) enable them to increase this virtue. There is actually no evidence of navies exchanging information on submarine patrol areas even with allies

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<sup>38</sup> Abbas, “Surface Tension.”

<sup>39</sup> Aditi Malhotra, “Hot Takes: Pakistan Test Fires Babur,” *Stimson Center*, January 17, 2017, <https://southasianvoices.org/hot-takes-pakistan-test-fires-babur-3/#sthash.xcGA13HA.dpuf>. Also see, “What are Tactical Nuclear Weapons?,” *Union of Concerned Scientists*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ucs.org/resources/tactical-nuclear-weapons#:~:text=As%20the%20Cold%20War%20ended,surface%20ships%20and%20multipurpose%20submarines>. Also see an earlier commentary by Ravi Ganesh, *Lowy Institute*, Political stability first, strategic stability second, October 14, 2014, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/political-stability-first-strategic-stability-second>

and partners, except in exercises; giving even hints to an adversary would be impossible and, in fact, ill-advised as explained later. At the operational level, information security (INFOSEC) is paramount. In her 2025 report, Hely Desai recommends that the two nations (i.e. India and Pakistan) “Formulate a formal agreement to address confrontations involving naval forces, particularly nuclear-armed submarines, in contested waters.”<sup>40</sup> This is very questionable and no navy and nation are likely to agree to such a loss of operational security. Submarine patrols, especially SSBN patrols are secrets that C2 authorities of nuclear forces naval control authorities make the areas known to only very few people even internally. Thus, agreements on information sharing of submarine deployments of any types, leave alone SSBNs, is highly unlikely even between friends and allies. In fact, a British and French SSBN had collided underwater somewhere in the Atlantic in February 2009. Both were and remain NATO members but did not share deployment details.<sup>41</sup> So it stands today.

### *Surface Ship and Aircraft CBMs are Different*

While submarines derive their value from a contradictory term this writer has coined, “covert presence”, surface ships and aircraft are more visible, provide the value of overt presence when required and their operations in less than war situations are more amenable to CBMs. Indeed, INCSEA type of CBMs seem relatively easy and therefore do exist. Only if there is a technological breakthrough and submarines become far more “visible” to sensor-systems someday, could perhaps CBMs become more thinkable.<sup>42</sup> Maritime Surface Domain Awareness, to expand the more commonly used term MDA, is improving steadily, but in the Maritime Underwater Domain, stealth still rules, is guarded and is leveraged. There is indeed a risk in sharing data on submarine positions and deployment areas. It is a temptation to target an “unfriendly” submarine in conditions well short of war sinking it. The smoke-screen of plausible deniability could exist for the nation responsible and there could be a few more on the “suspect” list. Such an incident could happen with a SSBN as well. What is relevant is the intelligent guess that SSBNs try and patrol in areas where they are more likely to “survive tactically” (i.e. in areas where – other things considered – adversarial ASW would be minimal). For SSNs and SSKs, especially if equipped with nuclear weapons, any navy would need to work hard to keep a tab on them as explained below.

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<sup>40</sup> Desai, “Modernizing India-Pakistan Nuclear and Conventional CBMs.”

<sup>41</sup> Maya Carlin, “NATO Nightmare: How British and French Nuclear Submarines Smashed Into Each Other,” *The National Interest*, September 22, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/nato-nightmare-how-british-and-french-nuclear-submarines-smashed-each-other-211454>

<sup>42</sup> Sebastian Brixey-Williams, “Prospects for Game-Changers in Detection Technology,” in *The Future of the Undersea Deterrent: A Global Survey*, ed. Roary Medcalf (Australian National University National Security College, 2020), pp: 80-83. See also, Norman Friedman, “Strategic Submarines and Strategic Stability: Looking Towards the 2030s,” in *The Future of the Undersea Deterrence: A Global Survey*, ed. Rory Medcalf (Australian National University National Security College, 2020), pp: 69-79. Meanwhile, in the intervening years, a lot of research and experimentation continues; yet, a breakthrough seems distant at this moment. Time will tell, as it often does.

## *SDASW and SOASW in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)*

To keep a sufficient level of underwater domain awareness, India would need a multi-dimensional, multi-instrument approach to obtain it especially during times of tension. This would need extensive SOASW as mentioned above. If a conflict were to break out, it is likely that the Indian Navy would try and sink as many boats as would be possible. It may not be easy but would be necessary.<sup>43</sup> India would also expect that its own SSBNs could be subject to SOASW capability of an adversary. Pakistan would be expected to look for Indian SSBNs, likely with help from a partner or two. For this, it would mainly and possibly use its own increasing SSK force, its maritime patrol aircraft, unmanned vehicles, intelligence aggregation, etc. This is, therefore, an area where both navies would need to operate more carefully, avoid rashness or provocation, strike a balance between “marking” the other side’s submarines while making it difficult to be marked themselves.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This essay may seem a bit of a departure from the belief that CBMs are vital and trustworthy guardrails. It is not that CBMs cannot be conceived and even signed. They have been in place for India and Pakistan for several decades after all, covering some nuclear matters; land and air dimensions as well as in the maritime domain. Faith and hope in CBMs are understandable because they are mutually discussed, signed and often readily available in the public domain. CBMs seem to be akin to treaties that give an impression of reasonable longevity. They contain a framework of ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ in theory as well as in practice (again, sometimes “the practice is only in theory” to convey it as a witticism). In practice, however, CBMs may have limitations; they may need updating when circumstances change; and, they may benefit from related CBMs. However, people, especially leaders, matter the most. The arguments that look at the role that leaders play in creating disturbances are neither new nor rare. Treaties and agreements are often broken or ignored and history is replete with such examples. While these actions may be considered arguable by some, it is but another manifestation of the difficulty of comprehending that a mutually agreed-to piece of paper cannot always keep contributing to stability amid the reality of changing context, souring environment or at times the illogic of leaders. Therefore, it would be difficult for CBMs to continue contributing to confidence building as often intended because of words and actions of individuals in leadership positions do not always align with these measures. Incidents

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<sup>43</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, “Making India’s Sea Power Formidable and Future-Ready,” *Observer Research Foundation*, April 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/making-indias-sea-power-formidable-and-future-ready>

like the 2022 Brahmos accidental launch are preventable much more through professional competence and not because some CBM covers or does not cover such a situation.<sup>44</sup>

There has been general observance but also occasional breaches that have mildly tested what is called “good order at sea.” During the 1999 Kargil conflict, the 2002 deployments for Operation Parakram, Galwan period in mid-2020, as well as in the recent Operation Sindoor in May 2025, the Indian Navy deployed in strength, but there was no known confrontation or exchange of ordnance. However, the leverage and influence of Indian sea power was considerably in play.<sup>45</sup> If incidents like Pahalgam take place again, it is likely that Pakistan may bear kinetic consequences delivered by India’s navy as well.<sup>46</sup> During such tensions, however, commanders at all levels should be governed as well as guided by **adequate Rules of Engagement (ROE)** as well as contextual prudence.

Given the above considerations, it is not so much the currency/“modernity” of CBMs or their comprehensiveness that may central. It is rather the preferences and proclivity of leaders (political also “civilian/political” or politico-military or just military) to rattle their “nuclear sabres” or even conventional ones, that may be the larger problem potentially causing instability and often increase in risk.

Multiple hotlines, in combination with the observed tendency (in some cases) of leaders to overcommunicate, use social media rashly, send out mixed signals due to crossed wires, etc., may not be a good idea. Rather, the existing hotlines with Coast Guard HQ, Army HQ needs to be continued, and the MEA line should be tested occasionally with the Pakistani side. Once India establishes a Joint apex command structure, the larger military issues requiring urgent **point-to-point communication** could be with this HQ. We may need to acknowledge that it may not be so much lack of communication but inadequate thinking and planning and rash actions that queer the pitch.

In the maritime domain, the risks of so many Pakistani SSKs equipped with SLCMs and their preference for calling them tactical nuclear weapons for “warfighting” is a doctrinal danger and a real, practical risk. Rash use and excessive threats by Pakistan could result in catastrophe for both countries – Pakistan is likely to emerge very badly “bruised” even if they succeed in “taking India down”. This is not strategy, merely madness.

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<sup>44</sup> Refers to arguments made in Hely Desai’s CSDR paper and in other conferences.

<sup>45</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, “The Influence and Leverage of Indian Seapower: From Kargil to Future Readiness,” *IDSJ, Journal of Defence Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019), pp: 115-137, <https://idsa.in/system/files/jds/13-3-2019-influence-and-leverage-of-indian-seapower.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Abid Husain, “Are India and Pakistan Preparing for a Naval Face-off in a Future Conflict?,” *Al Jazeera*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/11/are-india-and-pakistan-preparing-for-a-naval-faceoff-in-a-future-conflict>

CBMs have their limits to address such risks in any realistic measure, but the logic of nuclear deterrence and prudence, especially in Pakistani leadership, might help. Likewise, Indian leadership should continue to maintain the general equipoise seen thus far. A degree of political rhetoric will exist even in New Delhi, and leaders might need to leverage media and social media carefully, noting that reckless reporting, AI generated visuals and even fake statements from leaders could prove inflammatory quickly and not only rouse passions, but could precipitate military responses which were not otherwise envisaged until then.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, in understanding the larger grand-strategic problem for India, it is advisable that other nations should better **understand the contexts of “continentality and maritimeness”** for India and that the maritime domain cannot be seen in as much of a singularity and separation as may be possible for their own strategic context.

In conclusion, **CBMs at the nuclear and INCLAND/INCSEA dimensions are helpful as tentative guardrails** in conditions of peace and in times of tensions. They require strengthening with ROE, prudent political-military directives and commanders all the way to those “on the spot.”

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<sup>47</sup> For a sane, pertinent discussion, related not only to Op Sindoor, but earlier Indian situations as well as the ongoing West Asian conflict see, Nitin Gokhale and Ketaki Angre, “The War You’re Not Seeing: How Reporting In Current War Is Different And Why,” *The Gist*, March 19, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVW258m-Gec>

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