

Proposing Maritime Confidence-Building Measures between India and Pakistan

By

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There are escalating tensions between India and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), which underscores the need for maritime confidence-building measures (CBM) and risk-reduction strategies to avoid any probability of future conflict. Power projection by the United States, China, and India is visible in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) as they seek to assert control over sea lines of communications (SLOC), navigate vital trade routes, and regulate energy transportation networks and natural resources, including fisheries, oil, and gas.

These states are modernizing their naval deterrence capabilities, thus weaponizing the waters of the IOR. The growing competition between US-led alliances, China and India, as well as India and Pakistan intensified, particularly with US support for India to counter China's influence in the IOR.

Pakistan views these developments as a security threat, as they challenge its maritime mobility and increase the risk of entanglement between Indian and Pakistani forces at sea. The escalating tensions between India and Pakistan underscore the need for maritime confidence-building measures (CBM) and risk-reduction strategies to avoid conflict. What are the evolving dynamics between India and Pakistan in the IOR and how can maritime CBMs be realized and institutionalized to prevent prospects for any dangers?

Maritime Entanglement in the IOR

Maritime entanglement refers to the complex and potentially dangerous situations where naval forces from different states, often adversaries, come into proximity or engage in activities that can lead to unintended confrontations, miscalculations, or escalations. The IOR is a center point for states' contestation where forces of India and Pakistan can interface anytime.

India is modernizing its naval capabilities to assert its regional dominance through advanced technologies such as [Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines](#), aircraft carriers, uncrewed systems, and sensors, thereby expanding its naval presence. India has also approved the purchase of MQ-9B high-altitude, long-endurance drones, which will enhance the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities of its armed forces in the IOR.

India is also inclined to procure high endurance unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) to further enhance its ISR, anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and [mine-counter measures \(MCM\)](#). India is using China's looming threat as leverage to procure [26 Rafale-M fighters to serve as the new carrier, Vikrant's, air wing, and three additional Kalvari-class submarines](#).

Pakistan, in turn, is also improving its deterrence survivability. Pakistan's capability is mainly based on conventional platforms with heavy reliance on cruise missiles. Its sea-based force consists of nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles, deployed on *Agosta*-class submarines or on-surface ships.

India's acquisition of autonomous underwater vehicles (AUV) adds new complexities to Indian Ocean security. These stealthy, autonomous systems enhance India's naval capabilities in surveillance and anti-submarine warfare and increase the risk of unintended encounters with

other countries' forces, especially Pakistan, as the autonomous nature of AUVs makes them less predictable and harder to monitor.

Furthermore, a cyberattack on surveillance or intelligence systems can create monitoring “blind spots,” leading to potential misinterpretations of naval activities. If one country’s radar is disabled, it might incorrectly assess the other’s movements, prompting a more aggressive stance. This risk escalates if command and control communications are also affected, as either side could misinterpret a blackout as a threat, potentially deploying additional naval assets and leading to unintended confrontations.

The presence of a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine near another state’s naval assets might be perceived as a prelude to an act of aggression, especially during times of heightened tensions. A stark example of this occurred during the [2019 Pulwama-Balakot](#) crisis between India and Pakistan. In the milieu of the Pulwama crisis, the Indian Navy declared that its carrier battle group, including the Indian nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, the INS Arihant, was on a deterrence patrol, which was “[swiftly shifted from exercise to operational disposition](#)” amid the crisis.

After the crisis, Pakistan reportedly detected an Indian submarine, suspected of being armed with nuclear weapons, within its maritime zone. The lack of transparency surrounding nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine movements makes it difficult for states to distinguish between routine operations and potential threats, increasing the risk of miscalculation.

This is particularly noteworthy in the IOR where numerous states assert their interests in strategically significant areas as well as crucial chokepoints for trade routes, namely the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. Thus, misinterpretation of naval maneuvers, especially involving nuclear-armed submarines, heightens the risk of maritime entanglement between India and Pakistan, which will create challenges for all the players involved and disrupt the SLOCs and transportation. These developments demand the opening of effective CBMs between India and Pakistan to prevent any risks in the maritime domain.

Proposed Confidence-Building Measures

In the context of India and Pakistan, several CBMs are applicable. First, establishing a mutual notification and data-sharing mechanism on cybersecurity threats between India and Pakistan is essential, given the growing reliance on digital systems for naval and maritime operations. This mechanism would help reduce misunderstandings and prevent the misattribution of cyber incidents to state actors.

Second, an agreement on prior notifications of naval activities such as naval exercises or critical movements of submarines is needed. This will enhance transparency and trust by ensuring that routine movements, such as those involving nuclear submarines, are not misinterpreted as hostile actions.

Third, an agreement on managing incidents at sea can also be formalized by setting up clear protocols for their behavior during unintended or unexpected encounters at sea. This would help both countries to turn dangerous eventualities into normal situations. The two states can create standardized rules of engagement for naval forces operating nearby and develop crisis-management protocols to handle maritime incidents.

Fourth, another risk-reduction initiative could be a submarine rescue agreement, enabling cooperation in case of climate-prone or any natural crisis-led accidents involving rescuing crew and sunk submarines, and sheltering the survivors on board.

Fifth, the ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) deployment notification and safety protocol CBM proposes that India notify Pakistan, via a neutral third party or direct hotline, about routine SSBN deployments near Pakistan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Arabian Sea. It includes communication protocols to prevent accidental encounters from escalating, with India providing limited, non-sensitive information on SSBN timing and location near shared maritime boundaries.

Sixth, an agreement on the non-deployment of AUVs between India and Pakistan is essential to mitigate risks associated with autonomous systems in sensitive maritime areas. Establishing no-deployment zones, particularly near nuclear sites, disputed areas, and key naval bases, would reduce the chances of misinterpretation and accidental confrontations, offering a safety buffer in shared waters.

Seventh, India and Pakistan could establish a code of conduct (CoC) for the Arabian Sea to manage maritime interactions, reduce confrontation risks, and promote peaceful sea use amid regional tensions. Modeled after the South China Sea CoC. This CBM would provide a framework of rules for behavior in contested areas, particularly near disputed zones like Sir Creek and along shared maritime boundaries.

Eighth, direct bilateral maritime cooperation and conflict resolution between India and Pakistan would ideally be the most effective approach. Given the current state of relations between the two countries, this option remains politically challenging.

Therefore, a more feasible path to promote bilateral trust would come through multilateral forums. For example, the Indian Ocean Rim Association can be a valuable avenue to which both nations are already members. This forum provides a platform for indirect cooperation on shared maritime issues such as security, trade, and disaster-related risk management.

Expanding their collaboration within this multilateral forum, particularly on non-sensitive issues like anti-piracy efforts and environmental protection, could help build trust between them. As multilateral engagement deepens, it could serve as a steppingstone toward more focused and issue-specific dialogues between India and Pakistan at a bilateral level.

Implementation of the above agreements would provide a structured approach to promote a more secure and stable maritime environment in the IOR preventing miscommunication or misunderstandings and ensuring safety during maritime operations, contributing to greater stability in the IOR.

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