

MURKY WATERS: NAVAL NUCLEAR DYNAMICS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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More than five years have passed since India launched its first ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) in July 2009. Meanwhile, Pakistan formally inaugurated a Naval Strategic Force Command headquarters in 2012 and has declared its intent to develop its own sea-based deterrent. As India and Pakistan develop their naval nuclear forces, they will enter increasingly murky waters. By further institutionalizing relations between their navies and by insisting on stronger transparency with regard to naval nuclear developments, both countries may succeed in adding a greater degree of stability to what otherwise promises to be a dangerously volatile maritime environment.

Ongoing Naval Nuclear Dynamics in South Asia

- India's pursuit of a sea-based nuclear strike force is the next logical step in its quest for an assured retaliatory capability.
- India has conducted a series of test firings of Dhanush-class short-range ballistic missiles from offshore patrol vessels. It appears that for the Indian Navy, the Dhanush program is a stopgap measure until the SSBN fleet comes to fruition.
- The submarine-based leg of India's nuclear triad will have a major impact on the nation's existing command-and-control arrangements.
- To enjoy an effective sea-based deterrent vis-à-vis China, India's other prospective nuclear adversary, New Delhi has to develop larger SSBNs with greater missile carriage capacity and more powerful nuclear reactors.
- Pakistan's naval nuclear ambitions are fueled primarily by the sense of a growing conventional, rather than strategic, imbalance between New Delhi and Islamabad.
- By dispersing low-yield nuclear weapons across a variety of naval platforms, Islamabad aims to acquire escalation dominance and greater strategic depth and to reduce the incentives for a preemptive strike on its nuclear assets.

Takeaways for India and Pakistan

- Naval nuclear operations during the Cold War hold an immense value in terms of thinking more deeply about issues such as conventional operations under a nuclear shadow, naval nuclear signaling, and escalation control.
- In order to avert misunderstanding, India's nuclear management would gain from clearer communication and greater transparency, particularly with regard to the Dhanush program.
- As Pakistan seeks to nuclearize its fleet, it will encounter a number of challenges. Chinese assistance could provide a way for Islamabad to more rapidly alleviate some of these difficulties. Considering the potential risks, however, Beijing may wish to maintain a greater distance from Pakistan's military nuclear enterprise.
- Over the past decade, India's and Pakistan's coast guards have enacted a number of confidence-building measures. Going forward, decisionmakers in New Delhi and Islamabad might consider extending initiatives to their navies as well.

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