

Introduction

India has been the predominant power in South Asia since its victory over Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh war, but has been frustrated by its inability to secure explicit recognition of its regional superpower status from extra-regional states with security interests in the Indian Ocean area. The steady build-up of the superpowers' naval forces in the Indian Ocean at the end of the 1970s reinforced the perception in New Delhi that India was not widely regarded as a legitimate regional power. In terms of New Delhi's self-image, this situation was clearly unacceptable, but in the absence of a conspicuous maritime threat, hardly seems cause for the kind of naval expansion India has undertaken in recent years.

New Delhi has been building up its naval forces in a manner which suggests that it is seeking to play a greater role in the broader Indian Ocean region. The ongoing acquisition of sophisticated naval systems, including aircraft carriers and a nuclear-powered submarine, raises concern that New Delhi has more heroic ambitions than simply defending its property and immediate neighbourhood. Because New Delhi has failed to explain the purpose of its naval build-up, its neighbours feel threatened by its actions and have responded in kind. Some of the key littoral states have already reacted to India's naval expansion by enhancing their forces and improving their facilities. Indonesia, Pakistan and Australia, for example, have all noted and responded to India's moves at the political and military level. The purpose of this paper is to assess the significance of India's maritime expansion for peace and security in the Indian Ocean region.

Background

For most of the period since its independence in 1947, Indian defence policy has reflected the historical vulnerability of the subcontinent to threats from its land frontiers. As such, New Delhi's security priorities have developed from roots deep in the legacy of British dominion in India. In fact, contemporary Indian security goals are analogous to the fundamental strategic objectives of the British: to deny any extra-regional power a role in the affairs of South Asia and to be the dominant power in the region.