

offensive operations further afield.³⁸ Nevertheless, the crucial role of the Hermes and its Sea Harriers in the British operations in the Falklands War was obviously noted by Indian naval strategists.

There are no indications that India intends to add additional carriers in the future, nor is it likely to given the enormous costs of acquiring, and operating, these most expensive of naval ships. This does not leave India with much flexibility in developing a strategy for its carrier operations because three vessels is the absolute minimum required to maintain at least one on permanent station in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, aircraft carriers cannot sail unescorted but require a full complement of warships in the supporting carrier task force. It is inconceivable that India would be prepared to tie up so many of its naval assets in such a narrow carrier protection role. Nevertheless, despite their limitations, India's aircraft carriers are potentially capable of fulfilling important sea-control functions within the bounds of their operational environment. They would pose a considerable strategic problem for most of the littoral states in the Indian Ocean but it must be noted that the carriers would themselves be vulnerable to land-based air attack by advanced planes such as the F-16s of Pakistan and Singapore and the F-18s of Australia.

Whereas a full sea-control capability may not be attainable, a sea-denial capacity may well be and the Indian navy appears to be pursuing such a strategy. Carriers are essentially sea-control instruments, but submarines are used for sea-denial purposes. It is significant that the underwater element has seen the fastest growth in the Indian navy. India's submarine fleet comprises seventeen vessels: one nuclear-powered Soviet *Charlie*-class; six Soviet *Kilo*-class; eight Soviet *Foxtrot*-class; and two West German *T-209*-class. The first Indian-assembled *T-209* was launched in October 1989. The build-up of the submarine fleet will provide India with mobile defence and interdiction forces in the crucial western approaches to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea where there are limited opportunities for New Delhi to establish forward bases. The security of the sea route from the Gulf will become increasingly important as India's

³⁸ India's Sea Harriers appear most likely to be used in an interceptor role in the approaches to India. The Sea Kings are obviously charged with defending the carriers from submarine attack.