WALTER C. LADWIG III

India and Military Power Projection

Will the Land of Gandhi Become a Conventional Great Power?

ABSTRACT

All three branches of the Indian armed forces have recently articulated the need to operate beyond the country's immediate borders. While the Indian military is highly unlikely to achieve its more ambitious power projection objectives in the medium term, the conventional wisdom that India's traditional foreign-policy orientation precludes military power projection is untenable, especially for an aspiring regional hegemon.

KEYWORDS: India, military, army, navy, air force

WHEN CONSIDERING THE RANGE of foreign policy tools employed by independent India, military power projection may not come readily to mind. Indeed, the conventional wisdom is that India's traditional foreign policy orientation all but precludes projection of military power beyond its territory. Such a belief not only fails to appreciate India's past and likely future use of military power abroad, it also ignores the fungibility of military tools for projecting both "hard" and "soft" power.

In the past five years, all three branches of the Indian armed forces have articulated the need to be able to operate beyond India's borders. The navy's 2007 maritime strategy speaks repeatedly about the need to "project power" as a means of supporting foreign policy objectives and achieving national aims.[1]

WALTER C. LADWIG III is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at Merton College, University of Oxford, and an Associate of the Corbett Center for Maritime Policy Studies at King's College London. Research for this article was conducted while he was a Predoctoral Fellow of the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. He wishes to thank Maya Chadda, David Crouse, Sumit Ganguly, Timothy Hoyt, S. Paul Kapur, and Stefanie von Hlatky for helpful comments and advice. Email: <walter.ladwig@politics.ox.ac.uk>.

1. *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence [Navy], 2007), pp. iv, 11.

In particular, the Indian Navy is keen to boost its ability to decisively influence military operations on land.[2] For his part, when Air Chief Marshal S. P. Tyagi was chief of the Air Staff, he argued that India needed "a strategic reach to safeguard our national interests," while official statements note that the Indian Air Force "is increasingly used for power projection beyond South Asia."[3] Similarly, a local defense analyst reports, "[T]he Indian Air Force's revised war doctrine envisages its transformation into an aerospace power capable of conducting full-spectrum operations and extending its strategic reach from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca."[4] Even the traditionally inward-looking army is reportedly focusing on expeditionary warfare, with discussions at a recent infantry commanders' conference focused on transforming the infantry into an "expeditionary force" for use in an "out of area contingency."[5] Unsurprisingly, a number of analysts both inside and outside of India look at recent military acquisitions and perceive that

> India has begun inducting power-projection platforms, such as aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, long-range combat aircraft with mid-air refueling capability and landing platform dock ships for expeditionary warfare and humanitarian missions and is also developing an intercontinental ballistic missile with a strike range in excess of 5,000 km—all with the collective aim of influencing events far from home.[6]

Similarly, external observers such as Ashley Tellis contend that "India is slowly maturing into a conventional great power," while the *New York Times* has run headlines proclaiming the "Land of Gandhi Asserts Itself as Global Military Power."[7]

2. Arunkumar Bhatt, "Focus on Navy's Influence on Land Operations," *The Hindu* (Chennai, India), May 7, 2006.

3. "India's Air Force Looks to Enhance Its Reach with Upgrades and Force Multipliers," *Defence Industry Daily*, February 23, 2008; press release, Indian Embassy (Paris), "India: Country of Honor at Bastille Day," July 14, 2009.

4. Rahul Bedi, "Getting in Step: India Country Briefing," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, February 6, 2008.

5. "Indian Army Mulls Ambitious War Plan," *Times of India* (New Delhi), September 18, 2009.

6. Bedi, "Getting in Step," p. 1. For similar assessments, see "ViewsWire: The Rise of India," *Economist Intelligence Unit,* September 29, 2008, accessed from <factiva.com> database on January 12, 2010; Amit Gupta, "India's Military Aviation Market," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 3:2 (Summer 2009), p. 52; James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance, 2009* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), p. 388; and R. K. Jasbir Singh, ed., *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009* (Dehra Dun, India: Natraj Publishers, 2009), p. 257.

7. Both quoted in Anand Giridharadas, "Land of Gandhi Asserts Itself as Global Military Power," *New York Times*, September 22, 2008.

Such language and actions certainly run counter to the traditional view of India's early leaders, who profoundly believed that "power, especially military power, was the cause of evil," as well as contemporary civil and military leaders who believe that India has little need to develop the capacity to project military force far beyond its borders.[8] As one former joint secretary in the Ministry of Defence bluntly remarked to the author, "India does not believe in power projection."[9] Similarly, a former cabinet minister discounted the notion that India would ever militarily intervene in another nation's internal affairs, with the remark that "India would never do a Grenada."[10] Even some retired flag officers believe that India will never undertake out of area power projection, claiming the concept is "not in the Indian psyche."[11]

Instead, it is often suggested that India seeks only to project "soft power"—the attractive qualities of its culture and society—abroad to gain influence without resorting to military force. The idea of projecting India's culture, religions, art, and political morality abroad has traction within the Indian government, and some officials go so far as to suggest that India will seek to become a "soft power superpower."[12] In that vein, several recent academic studies of Indian "power projection" have tended to focus largely, or even exclusively, on the non-military aspects of India's efforts to influence neighboring regions.[13]

8. K. Shankar Bajpai, "Engaging with the World," in Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta, eds., *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007), p. 79.

9. Author interview with senior member of the Indian Administrative Service, New Delhi, July 2009.

10. Author interview with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parliamentarian, New Delhi, July 2009. The reference is to the October 1983 U.S.-led invasion of Grenada, code named "Operation Urgent Fury," undertaken by approximately 7,300 American soldiers and 350 troops from neighboring Caribbean countries. The operation was mounted at the request of the governor-general of Grenada, Paul Scoon, and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, following a successful coup against the Grenadian government. Although the U.S. was successful in securing the island and reestablishing legitimate authority in a matter of days, the lawfulness of the invasion was criticized by the U.K., Canada, China, the Soviet Union, and the U.N. General Assembly.

11. Author's interviews with retired military officers, foreign service personnel, and scholars at the Institute for Defence Analysis and Institute for National Security Studies, New Delhi, July 2009.

12. See the comments on soft power by then-Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, "Aerospace Power in Tomorrow's World," speech, New Delhi, February 4, 2007, <http://www.indianembassy.org/prdetail798/–%09–address-by-external-affairs-minister-at-the-inaugural-session-of-the-international-seminar-on-andquot%3Baerospace-power-in-tomorrow's-worldandquot%3B>, accessed January 12, 2010.

13. See, for example, Prithvi Ram Mudiam, "Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East: Tools and Objectives," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6:1 (2007), pp. 417–39;

Is India poised to become a "global military power" with the ability to forcibly "influen[ce] events far from home," or will it retain its well-documented allergy toward military power projection? As with many things in life, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. This article argues that, in the medium term, the limitations of political will and military capacity will prevent India from achieving some of the more ambitious power projection goals discussed by defense analysts and members of the strategic community. On the other hand, this article demonstrates that the idea that India has rejected and will continue to reject military power projection is untenable. This latter view appears to be based on an incorrect understanding of both the concept of military power projection and the fungibility of military tools for the projection of both hard and soft power, as well as India's needs in a changing geopolitical environment. Moreover, the notion that power projection is alien to India's strategic thinking overlooks the fact that India has not hesitated to "sort out" its neighbors when New Delhi felt that its interests were threatened.[14] In comparison to a superpower such as the U.S., India's power projection needs are limited, but they are nonetheless real.

This article seeks to bring analytical clarity to the concept of military power projection in the Indian context and to explore the potential range of power projection capabilities India may possess in the coming years. To accomplish this goal, the article proceeds in three parts. First, the concept of military power projection is defined, and nine types of power projection missions are identified. Second, India's past use of power projection and future needs are briefly discussed in the light of contemporary strategic priorities. The final section discusses the utility of each of the three components of conventional military power (sea, air, and land) to fulfill the nine missions and examines India's potential power projection capability in these three areas. Given the previously noted focus by other scholars on Indian soft power projection, this article focuses solely on the use of military tools to shape political events abroad.

---

and David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8:2 (April 2009), pp. 107–43.

14. While some contend that such interventions were only undertaken at the request of the host nation's government, a close reading of several instances, such as the 1987 intervention in Sri Lanka, suggests that coercion played a role in bringing some of these requests about. For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see Devin T. Hagerty, "India's Regional Security Doctrine," *Asian Survey* 31:4 (April 1991), pp. 351–63.

EXAMINING MILITARY POWER PROJECTION

To some, the phrase "power projection" suggests imposing regime change on a state far away from home for strategic gain.[15] In this view, a prototypical example might be Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.[16] While such a conceptualization captures some key elements of power projection, it is far too narrow. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) defines power projection much more broadly as being "[t]he ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power—political, economic, informational, or military—to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability."[17]

Focusing specifically on the final element of national power in the DoD's definition—the use of military tools—it is possible to disaggregate military power projection into nine different aspects based on the political goals being sought and the level of force employed. Four of these relate to the employment of "soft" military power (securing sea lanes of communication, non-combatant evacuation operations, humanitarian relief, and peacekeeping), and five are primarily concerned with "hard" military power (showing the flag, compellence/deterrence, punishment, armed intervention, and conquest).

Soft Military Power Projection

Securing Sea Lanes of Communication. The protection of shipping lanes from attack by hostile states or irregular threats. As the Indian Navy's maritime doctrine notes, trade is increasingly critical to the Indian economy, which makes the protection of the sea lanes transiting the Indian Ocean a significant priority.[18] Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Indian Navy played a high-profile role in escorting U.S. shipping through the Straits of Malacca.

15. Although the exact formulation does vary, this was certainly the dominant view expressed in nearly 50 interviews and meetings the author conducted in New Delhi in July 2009 with politicians, former ambassadors, active duty and retired military personnel, senior members of the Indian Administrative Service, journalists, and local defense analysts.

16. Frequently cited to author by various Indian interlocutors.

17. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1–02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict>, accessed January 12, 2010.

18. Integrated Headquarters (Navy), *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, April 2004), pp. 63–64.

More recently, Indian naval vessels have been deployed to the Gulf of Aden, where they have thwarted several attempted hijackings by pirates.

Non-combatant Evacuation Operations. The evacuation of Indian or friendly third country civilians from a foreign country when they are endangered by war or civil unrest. For example, during Operation Sukoon (Urdu: Relief) the navy evacuated 2,280 Indian, Sri Lankan, and Nepalese civilians from Lebanon ahead of the 2006 Israeli-Hizbollah War. Several orders of magnitude larger was the airlift of over 100,000 Indians from Iraq and Kuwait ahead of the 1991 Gulf War.

Humanitarian Relief. The use of military forces abroad to assist in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Following the 2004 Asian tsunami, the Indian Navy mobilized 32 ships and over 20,000 naval personnel to evacuate casualties, as well as provide emergency sources of power and water to the peoples of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia.[19]

Peacekeeping. Military operations designed to support diplomatic efforts to reach a long-term political settlement to an ongoing dispute. India has been one of the most significant contributors to U.N. peacekeeping missions. As of 2009, the Indian Army had roughly 8,000 personnel deployed in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, East Timor, the Ivory Coast, and the Golan Heights.[20]

Hard Military Power Projection

Showing the Flag. The symbolic deployment of military forces to a region to demonstrate political interest, resolve, or willingness to take more forceful military action. For example, in June 1987 the Indian Air Force violated Sri Lankan airspace when it undertook Operation Poomalai (Tamil: Garland), the forced airdrop of relief supplies to ethnic Tamils during the siege of Jaffna. This action sent a clear message to the government in Colombo about New Delhi's desire to see a negotiated end to the conflict and helped lead to

---

19. Marwaan Macan-Markar, "India Shifts Regional Geopolitical Cards," *Asia Times*, January 27, 2005; Rajat Pandit, "Navy Makes a 'Blue-Water' Mark," *Times of India*, January 7, 2005.

20. Deepak Kapoor, "Changing Global Security Environment," in Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, pp. 60–62.

the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord.[21] More recently, the Indian Navy has undertaken several high-profile deployments to the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf, which have been interpreted as important signals of Indian interest in these regions.[22]

Compellence and Deterrence. The use or the threat of military force against another state to induce it into or dissuade it from pursuing a given policy. In this form, power projection acts as a diplomatic tool, attempting to influence the decision-making process and calculus of foreign actors. For example, the governor of East Pakistan's decision to surrender to India in 1971 has been attributed to the compellence effect of well-timed air strikes on his residence in Dhaka at the very moment he was conducting a crisis response meeting.[23] In the same conflict, the destruction of East Pakistani airfields after the air force in the territory had been attritted was an exercise in deterrence by denial that sought to preclude intervention by an outside power.

Punishment. The punitive use of force against another state in response to its pursuit of a given policy. Aside from limited punitive strikes on Pakistani posts across the Line of Control in Kashmir in response to militant activity (not an expeditionary use of force), punishment has not been widely employed by the Indian military.[24]

Armed Intervention. The forcible movement of military units into another nation's territory to influence the internal affairs of the target country, short of outright conquest. Historical examples in India's immediate neighborhood range in size from the 1988 deployment of a parachute battalion to the Maldives (Operation Cactus) to put down a coup to the 1971 intervention in

21. Steven R. Wiseman, "India Airlifts Aid to Tamil Rebels," *New York Times*, June 5, 1987.

22. Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept," pp. 107–43; and Walter C. Ladwig III, "Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, 'Look East', and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific," *Asian Security* 5:2 (June 2009), pp. 94–96.

23. Jasjit Singh, "Aerospace Challenge to India," in Sinha and Mohta, eds., *Indian Foreign Policy*, p. 912.

24. An example of these types of putative strikes against Pakistan includes the Indian Army's shelling of Pakistani installations across the Line of Control (LOC) after the 2001 militant attack on the Jammu & Kashmir state legislative building in Srinagar. This shelling smashed 11 Pakistani posts and inflicted "widespread damage and destruction." Celia W. Dugger, "India Shells Kashmir Area, Imperiling Delicate Balance," *New York Times*, October 16, 2001.

East Pakistan by three corps of the Indian Army to assist guerillas fighting for independence.

Conquest. The offensive use of military assets to forcibly occupy non-contiguous territory controlled or claimed by another state. This has not been an aspect of power projection pursued by independent India, although at the time some observers believed that the use of military forces in Hyderabad (Operation Polo), Goa (Operation Vijay), and elsewhere as part of the post-Independence consolidation of the Indian Union was "an act of military aggression and conquest."[25]

Given this disaggregation, it is clear that power projection is a much broader concept than mere invasion seeking regime change. Military assets, depending on how they are employed, can advance a state's foreign policy goals by facilitating the projection of either hard or soft forms of military power. Moreover, since Independence, India has employed at least seven, and perhaps eight, of the nine aspects of military power projection.

WILL INDIA PROJECT MILITARY POWER IN THE FUTURE?

There is good reason to believe that India will have at least as great a need for military power projection in the future as it has in the past. New Delhi's primary strategic priority over the next decade—deepening internal consolidation—requires sustained economic development and enhanced internal security. This, in turn, is at least partially dependent on developments in the country's immediate neighborhood. As current National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has argued, "[U]nless we have a peaceful and prosperous periphery, we will not be able to focus on our primary tasks of socio-economic development."[26] Furthermore, the achievement of regional peace and stability in South Asia will be a necessary precondition for India to claim great-power status.

Unfortunately, many of the countries on India's periphery are weak or fragile states. For example, *Foreign Policy* magazine's 2010 index of failed

25. For example, the last British Viceroy Louis Mountbatten reported that "even quite intelligent people" held this view in regard to India's action in Hyderabad. Letter, Mountbatten to C. Rajagopalachari, September 25, 1948, Mountbatten Papers, Southampton University, Southhampton, UK.

26. Shivshankar Menon, "The Challenges Ahead for India's Foreign Policy," speech at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, April 10, 2007, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/newsletters/SAP/pdf/april07/challenges_india.pdf>, accessed January 12, 2010.

states included five of India's neighbors (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka) in the top 25.[27] Although many of the challenges plaguing India's immediate neighborhood are political and economic in nature, and therefore not necessarily directly amenable to solutions based on the application of conventional military power, New Delhi may periodically require the ability to shape events in these countries that military power projection provides.

Further afield, successive political leaders in India have identified the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as "a legitimate area of interest . . . for the first quarter of the 21st century."[28] As a result, the Indian Navy's maritime strategy states that "whatever happens in the [Indian Ocean littoral region] can affect our national security and is of interest to us."[29] India's interests in this region are largely economic in nature, with energy access and growing regional economic engagement meshing with concerns about the safety of ships transiting the entire Indian Ocean littoral. In recent years, official statements have been increasingly blunt about the importance India attaches to energy security, which is deemed "vital for an assured high rate of [economic] growth."[30] At present India imports over half of its natural gas and 70% of its oil, the vast majority of which comes from the Persian Gulf. Over the next 20 years, India's oil consumption is expected to grow at an annual rate of 5% to 7%—more than three times the global average rate of increase—which will more than double present day consumption by 2025.[31] To sustain its high rates of economic growth, India must secure access to new sources of hydrocarbon energy.

27. Nepal actually ranks no. 26 on the list. See "The Failed States Index 2010," <www.foreign-policy.com/failedstates>, accessed August 11, 2010.

28. The quote is taken from the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (April 2004), p. 56. The Ministry of Defence identifies the same region as "India's security environment." Refer to *Annual Report 2006–2007* (Delhi: Ministry of Defence, 2007), p. 2. For similar language from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, see "Prime Minister's Address," speech presented at the Combined Commanders Conference, New Delhi, October 26, 2004, <http://pmindia.nic.in/lspeech.asp?id=37>, accessed January 12, 2010. Brajesh Mishra, then-national security advisor to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, also identified a similar zone of interest in "Global Security: An Indian Perspective," speech presented at the National Defence Institute, Lisbon, April 13, 2000, <http://meaindia.nic.in/disarmament/dm13apr00.htm>, accessed January 12, 2010.

29. *Freedom to Use the Seas*, p. 59.

30. *Annual Report 2007–2008* (Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2008), p. i.

31. "Weekly Offshore Rig Review: India In-Depth," *RigLogix,* May 4, 2006, <http://www.rigzone.com/news/article.asp?a_id=31885>, accessed January 12, 2010.

The ability to influence events in this broader region may take on increasing importance as India's comprehensive national power grows. Scholars of international relations argue that as a state's wealth and material power increase, it "will select a larger bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state."[32] In terms of foreign policy preferences, scholars also argue that rising powers have generally sought to expand their spheres of influence— as state power increases, so do political interests abroad.[33] This expanded material capacity and broadening of political interests are expected to translate into an increased interest in favorably shaping the state's strategic environment. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that India will have at least the same level of need for power projection missions going forward as it has in the past. It will, in fact, most likely make increased use of such tools in the future.

As discussed previously, New Delhi has already employed its power projection assets to provide regional public goods (e.g., humanitarian relief, non-combatant evacuation operations, and securing sea lanes of communication) in parts of the Indian Ocean littoral in a manner befitting a regional hegemon.[34] One key difference between great powers and other states is that great powers create external security for their region beyond merely protecting their own borders. Any country can have regional interests, but great powers also have regional responsibilities.[35] As the dominant regional power in South Asia and an aspirant to a seat on the U.N. Security Council, India is likely to be called on in the future to take an increased role in ensuring international peace and security, either under U.N. auspices or as a part of various multilateral coalitions. While some in New Delhi may hope India can free-ride to great-power status, including ducking hard decisions and avoiding shouldering a burden, this status is unlikely to be achieved without bearing more responsibility.[36] It is not possible to precisely identify in advance

32. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 23.

33. Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 2–3.

34. For literature on the hegemonic provision of public goods, see Charles Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides," *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2 (1981), pp. 242–54; and John G. Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," *Political Science Quarterly* 104:3 (1989), pp. 375–400.

35. Bharat Verma, "Carrot and Stick!" *Indian Defence Review* 23:1 (February 2008), <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2008/02/carrot-and-stick-2.html>, accessed January 12, 2010.

36. The salience of the belief in India's ability to free ride was argued to the author by several journalists covering the diplomatic beat, New Delhi, July 2009.

the specific contingencies that could compel India to project hard military power abroad, but, beyond the historical instances already noted, India may find several additional reasons to send its armed forces beyond its borders, as discussed below.

Future Military Roles

Support Forces Deployed on Peacekeeping Missions. It is hardly inconceivable that Indian peacekeepers (or those of friendly nations) could be targeted by belligerent parties during the course of their duties, thus potentially requiring a forcible extraction or rescue operations along the lines of Operation Khukri in Sierra Leone, where Indian forces rescued 230 U.N. peacekeepers who had been held hostage for over 75 days by the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front. Because India's local U.N. partners in the region were too weak to respond effectively, the success of this operation depended in large part on the rapid introduction of a battalion of Indian grenadiers and paracommandos airlifted directly from the Kashmir Valley, as well as a flight of Indian Air Force (IAF) attack helicopters.[37]

Protecting Indians Abroad. Several recent events highlight the increasing salience of this issue. Following the 2000 coup in Fiji that ousted Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian, there was significant pressure on the Indian government to take steps to protect Fiji's large Indian community. However, the lack of naval capacity rendered such an operation impossible. Of even more concern are the five million Indians employed in the Persian Gulf. A contingency in this region is hardly unthinkable, given the 1991 and 2006 emergencies that required major evacuations of Indian nationals from conflict zones as outlined above.

Prevent Open Hostility from Immediate Neighbors. Aside from the domestic pressure brought by ethnic Tamils within India, the geopolitical imperative behind India's 1987 intervention in Sri Lanka was to preempt intervention in the conflict by an extra-regional power.[38] Although the Sri Lankan conflict has ended, the imperative remains. If, for example, a neighboring country

---

37. Nigerian and Ghanaian troops were included in the operation for political reasons at the instance of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. V. K. Jetley, "'Op Khukri'—The United Nations Operation Fought in Sierra Leone Part-I," *USI Journal* 137:567 (January-March 2007), pp. 81–94.

38. Dilip Bobb, "Cautious Optimism," *India Today*, August 31, 1987, p. 69.

such as Burma were poised to emerge as a full-fledged satellite of China, New Delhi might feel compelled to act to protect its own interests.

Recognizing that India will likely have an increased need and desire for power projection in the future is not the same as arguing it will employ these capabilities indiscriminately around the globe. Such operations will still have to be in response to a threat to a vital national interest and have significant support from the population, if not, ideally, the international community. Nonetheless, these instances are likely to increase as India gains in international stature.

INDIA'S CONVENTIONAL MILITARY AND POWER PROJECTION

The three varieties of conventional military power—sea power, air power, and land power—all contribute to power projection in different ways. As Table 1 indicates, sea power has a high degree of fungibility across various power projection missions and will likely form the foundation of India's global reach in coming years. This is particularly true in India's "extended neighborhood," since the region stretching "across [Asia's] sub-regions—be it East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia or Southeast Asia" is largely a maritime domain.[39] In contrast, air and land power play more limited, but nonetheless important, roles in India's power projection capabilities.

Sea Power

In light of the fact that roughly 90% of India's external trade by volume and 77% by value is seaborne, Indian maritime power has a role to play in sustaining domestic economic development.[40] Indeed, a host of observers dating back to the pre-Independence period has argued that India's economy is "at the mercy of the power which controls the sea."[41] In the northern Indian Ocean, securing sea lanes of communication will be facilitated by the Indian Navy's ability to exercise "sea denial" (negating an enemy's ability to use the sea but at the same time making no attempt to control the sea itself) in a region stretching from the Arabian Sea in the west to the Straits of Malacca

39. This articulation of India's "extended neighborhood" comes from *Annual Report 2005–2006* (Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2006), p. ii.

40. Bedi, "Getting in Step," p. 6.

41. K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (New York: Macmillan, 1945), p. 14.

TABLE 1. The Military Tools of Power Projection

	SLOC*	NEO**	Humanitarian	Peace Ops.	Show the Flag	Intervention	Compel/ Deter	Punish	Conquest
Land		●	●	●		●		●	●
Air		○	○		○	●	●	●	
Sea	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●

SOURCE: By author.
NOTE: ● = major tool of power projection; ○ = minor tool of power projection.
*Sea lanes of communication.
**Non-combatant evacuation operations.

in the east. Moreover, as India looks farther away for energy resources, its political and military leaders are explicitly linking this effort with the need for the Indian military, particularly the navy, to be able to "protect the country's economic and energy interests" in key parts of the Indian Ocean.[42]

Aircraft carriers, surface ships and submarines equipped with land-attack cruise missiles, and amphibious landing ships—the latter of which are discussed with land power below—are the key maritime power projection platforms that can influence events on land from the sea.[43] While submarines can rely on stealth to approach an enemy coastline, task forces of cruise-missile-armed surface platforms, amphibious assault ships, and aircraft carriers require the assistance of attack submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and modern destroyers to protect them from hostile submarines, aircraft, and anti-ship cruise missiles. Tankers and supply ships sustain maritime forces with food, fuel, and ammunition when operating a significant distance from friendly ports.

In 2008, then-Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sureesh Mehta foresaw that the navy of 2020 would be "capable of influencing the outcome of land battles and performing a constabulary role in the Indian Ocean region."[44] Achieving this will require a significant upgrade in capabilities. Naval planners envision a three-carrier fleet as the cornerstone of India's future blue-water navy: the 44,500-ton, Russian-built INS *Vikramaditya* (Sanskrit: Brave as the Sun) which is expected to join the fleet after 2012, and two domestically built aircraft carriers of the Vikrant class weighing in at 40,000 tons

42. "Indian Navy Gears up for Energy Security Role," *Times of India*, December 2, 2006.
43. *Freedom to Use the Seas*, p. 12.
44. Cited in Bedi, "Getting in Step," p. 6.

(INS *Vikrant*) (Sanskrit: Powerful) and 64,000 tons (INS *Vishal*) (Sanskrit: Great), scheduled to enter service in 2015 and 2018, respectively.[45] At the same time, the introduction of the fourth-generation supersonic MiG-29K Fulcrum provides India with the most powerful naval strike aircraft in the region and increases its force projection capacity by an order of magnitude.

However, these optimistic projections mask a dark reality: at present India's existing 28,000-ton aircraft carrier, launched in 1953, is on its last legs. Should the induction of the *Vikramaditya* or the *Vikrant* be delayed beyond the middle of the decade, as some informed observers speculate, the navy could find itself without a carrier for several years. At the same time, only 11 of the 30 Mk. 51 Sea Harrier fighters that were in service in the 1980s remain, and at the time of this writing, there is yet to be a test flight of the naval version of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's domestically designed Tejas lightweight fighter, which is supposed to replace the Harriers in providing air defense to the carriers.

Furthermore, the *Vikramaditya* and the *Vikrant* will carry only 16 fighters each. Assuming that the bigger *Vishal* will accommodate a larger complement of aircraft (50–60), analysts say it would have to operate in tandem with one of the 40,000-ton carriers to produce "as much striking power as a single U.S. Nimitz-class carrier. Even armed with precision-guided munitions, a contingent of this size could sustain only a modest land bombardment, and only for a modest time."[46] Moreover, a three-carrier fleet will only ensure that the navy has at least one carrier at sea at all times, given the repair, training, and deployment cycles for modern naval vessels. To be able to implement Admiral Mehta's constabulary role in the Indian Ocean, the navy would need to have the ability to maintain two carriers at sea at all times, which would suggest a need for twice as many flattops. With an estimated unit cost of $1.5 billion, against an annual naval procurement budget of $2.3 billion, building each additional carrier over six or seven years could easily tie up 9% to 11% of the acquisition budget per platform, making a rapid expansion of the fleet unlikely.[47]

45. The name for the second Vikrant-class carrier has not been finalized; some sources suggest it could instead be called the *Viraat* (Sanskrit: Giant) after India's current aircraft carrier.

46. James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 86–87.

47. Author's calculations based on figures in James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance, 2010* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010), p. 351; and Sudha Ramachandran,

The Indian Navy's surface-strike capability centers on the 290-kilometer-range supersonic BraMos cruise missile.[48] A joint venture between Russia and India, the BraMos can achieve Mach 2.5 speed, which is three times faster than the U.S. Tomahawk cruise missile. While highly effective in an anti-shipping role, the BraMos is less useful as a land-attack weapon because it possesses only one-tenth the range of the U.S. Tomahawk. This latter characteristic is also true of the land-attack variants of the Russian-designed 3M-54 Klub cruise missile (275 kilometer range) also in service with the Indian Navy. The relatively short range of these missiles would render surface-launched cruise missile strikes against a state with even modest anti-access capability (attack submarines, anti-ship missiles, or supporting surveillance systems) a risky proposition. According to published reports, the Defence Research and Development Organization is currently developing a subsonic cruise missile with a reported range of 1,000 kilometers. Code named *Nirbhay* (Sanskrit: Fearless), it could fill an important gap in the navy's land-attack capability. However, test flights of the missile have been repeatedly delayed.[49]

Finally, the Indian Navy's ability to project maritime power in the Indian Ocean and beyond is constrained by the fact that it is currently decommissioning surface ships faster than it is adding them.[50] At present, large portions of India's fleet of 57 surface combatants, including five of its eight destroyers and seven of its 11 frigates, are approaching the end of their service life. The navy requires these types of platforms, equipped with advanced anti-aircraft and anti-submarine systems, to operate in hostile littorals. Moreover, to achieve a real power projection capability, the navy will require several additional fleet replenishment tankers and modern replacements for its cadre of Soviet-era minesweepers.

Air Power

Air power projection comes mainly in two forms: strikes against ground-based targets and the transport of ground troops. Since the latter role is primarily a

---

"India Steals a March on the High Seas," *Asia Times*, May 12, 2010, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LE12Df04.html>, accessed May 12, 2010.

48. The acronym BraMos is a combination of the Brahmaputra and Moskva Rivers, which connotes Indo-Russian collaboration in the development of this type of missile.

49. Douglas Barrie and Neelam Mathews, "SU-30MKI to Get Indian Nirbhay Cruise Missile," *Aviation Week*, May 10, 2010.

50. Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, p. 260.

supporting one, it is taken up in the discussion of land power below. As a tool for power projection, the use or threat of air power is primarily used for compellence/deterrence or to punish another state, should the initial efforts fail to bring about a desired policy change. Affecting targets at a range beyond a few hundred miles requires advanced strike aircraft (typically operating in conjunction with refueling tanker aircraft) capable of penetrating enemy air defenses, longer-range cruise missiles, or ballistic missiles.

The chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal F. H. Major, has argued that Indian air power needs "a strategic reach to safeguard our national interests," which requires a "long-range presence, persistence and 'forward-basing arrangements'."[51] In this vein, the IAF's revised war doctrine is reportedly structured around "both pre-emptive action and swift retaliation" across a region stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca.[52] However, the air force has long suffered from the piecemeal acquisition of aircraft, and much of its fleet is facing obsolescence—raising questions about future combat power.[53]

Nonetheless, the IAF has pushed for an independent strategic role in future conflict, arguing that air power can influence the battle space through deep-strike missions.[54] The air force "aims to achieve this objective by operating advanced, long-range platforms with air-to-air refueling capability"[55] and "must be equipped for long-reach, persistence, all-weather, precision, air dominance, networked, and space-enabled force capabilities."[56] Most notable in this regard are efforts to induct long-range strike aircraft—particularly 272 fourth-generation Sukhoi Su-30s. The combination of SU-30s with precision-guided munitions, such as the AS-14 air-to-surface missile, would produce a significant ability to strike targets across the immediate neighborhood.

Even though long-range strike Sukhoi aircraft are quite capable, their ability to operate at a significant distance depends on the IAF's in-flight refueling capability. Although the IAF does have six IL-78MKI Midas tanker aircraft

51. Fali Major, "India's Air Force in the 21st Century," in ibid., pp. 72–73.

52. "India: Air Force," *Jane's World Air Forces,* June 1, 2009, p. 11.

53. B. K. Pandey, "Indian Air Force of the Future," *Indian Defence Review* 24:1 (March 2009), <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/military-and-space/Indian-Air-Force-of-the-future.html>, accessed January 12, 2010.

54. Bhashyam Kasturi, "Force Structures and Doctrines of the IAF," *Air Power Journal* 3:2 (Summer 2008), p. 10.

55. Bedi, "Getting in Step," p. 5.

56. Major, "India's Air Force in the 21st Century," p. 72.

(which doubles the Sukhoi's range to 6,000 kilometers), this only amounts to, in the words of one retired air marshal, "baby steps towards acquiring the capability of projecting combat power in the region. At this point in time, the capability is limited to a token force and cannot be described as significant."[57] In this regard, the IAF's hope to acquire an additional six new Airbus Military A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transports is a positive step. However, to support an expeditionary strike package of 60 aircraft, which would provide a modest ground-attack capability against multiple targets, at least 15 IL-78/A330 tankers would be required, notwithstanding the need for reserves or simultaneous capability in other areas.[58] If the entire fleet of Sukhois were to be so supported, the IAF would require nearly 60 tanker aircraft. Beyond existing procurement plans, achieving the capability to support 60 Sukhois with tankers would require an additional $1.13 billion, while equipping the entire fleet would cost $11.7 billion, against an annual IAF procurement budget of $4.19 billion.[59]

Strike aircraft are not the only way that offensive air power can contribute to compellence/deterrence or punishment type power projection missions. Given the simultaneously increasing lethality of air defense systems and the cost of combat aircraft, India may instead increasingly rely on surface-to-surface missiles for "deep strike against heavily defended targets in depth, such as airfields."[60] This could presage an increased role for India's ballistic missile forces, which just saw the 3,000-kilometer range Agni III approved for induction into the army. The follow-on 6,000-kilometer range Agni V intercontinental ballistic missile is expected to be tested in 2011[61] While these missiles are commonly associated with India's strategic nuclear program, they

57. Pandey, "Indian Air Force of the Future."

58. The U.S. Air Force assumes an 85% readiness rate for its tankers, meaning that the actual fleet must be 17.5% larger than the desired number of operational aircraft. Sixty aircraft would allow India to simultaneously strike four different targets each with a force package the size of the strike force Israel used to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981, but less than one-third the number of U.S. and British aircraft employed in the multi-day punitive strikes against Iraq in 1998's Operation Desert Fox. Statistics from Operation Desert Storm and Operation Allied Force confirm that one medium tanker is needed per four fighters for conventional strike missions. This ratio falls to 1:2.5 if aircraft are expected to loiter on station to provide persistent strikes against mobile targets as in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Carlo Kopp, "RAAF Aerial Refuelling: Where to Next?" *Australian Aviation* (March 2004), pp. 1–2.

59. Hackett, *The Military Balance, 2010*, p. 351.

60. Pandey, "Indian Air Force of the Future."

61. Ananya Dutta, "Saraswat: Agni-V Will Be Test-fired in 2011," *The Hindu*, September 13, 2010.

could be employed in a conventional role if necessary, thus having potentially coercive effects on neighboring powers.

Land Power

The employment of expeditionary land power requires the facilitation of airlift or sealift capabilities, as well as specially trained forces (such as airborne troops or marines), long-range command and control capabilities, and a significant logistical ability to support and sustain troops once an initial landing has been made. The chief of Army Staff, General Deepak Kapoor, had argued that "in keeping with our growing regional aspirations," the army needed to develop the capability to deploy ground forces for an out of area operation.[62] In that vein, at a 2009 infantry commanders' conference, the army's senior leadership explored the idea of transforming into an "expeditionary force" capable of responding to an overseas contingency on short notice.[63]

Although such capability may be required to fulfill U.N. peacekeeping obligations, there is some evidence that senior army leaders have been pressing for an increased overseas presence, "even outside the U.N. banner."[64] "Given its emerging regional power status," one former Indian flag officer contends, "India may be called upon to project power in the region, which may involve airlift of large military forces to areas of interest . . . outside of our borders and [the capability] to provide sustained logistic support."[65] This would, in turn, require a substantial expansion of the country's strategic airlift capability, which some argue is virtually nonexistent.[66] Lacking sufficient assets to suppress air defenses, some analysts believe that India's transports lack the ability to operate in hostile air environments.[67] However, other observers contend that India has sufficient civilian airlift capacity to move and sustain up to a brigade of troops in a permissive environment—provided there is access to secure airfields.[68]

62. Kapoor, "Changing Global Security Environment," in Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, pp. 60–62.
63. "Indian Army Mulls Ambitious War Plan."
64. Sujan Dutta, "Army for Larger Overseas Role," *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), April 18, 2007; Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, p. 68.
65. Pandey, "Indian Air Force of the Future."
66. Ibid.
67. "Armed Forces," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—South Asia*, June 16, 2009.
68. Stephen P. Cohen, "The Bad, the Ugly, and the Good: South Asian Security and the United States," *Testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services*, September 26, 2005, p. 8, <http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2005/0927southasia_cohen.aspx>, accessed January 12, 2010.

The strategic reach provided by heavy airlift also has utility in noncombatant evacuation operations and humanitarian relief missions. In 1991 the IAF, along with civil air assets, played a key role in evacuating 100,000 Indian nationals from the Persian Gulf ahead of the Gulf War.[69] More recently, India's airlift capabilities have reached across the extended neighborhood to ferry supplies and humanitarian aid during crises in venues from Lebanon to China.[70]

For future power projection, Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd.), the head of the Indian Army's principal think tank, the Center for Land Warfare Studies, argues that India requires a dedicated air assault brigade by early 2012.[71] The Agra-based 50th (Independent) Parachute Brigade might form the core of an air assault capability. But such a unit would require extensive organic fire support in the form of Lancer and Hind attack helicopters, to compensate for the lack of artillery possessed by such highly mobile troops. Moreover, the ability to move such a force in a rapid reaction scenario would require a significant increase of airlift capability. The IAF is rumored to be interested in buying 10 Boeing C-17s for heavy lift. However, moving a single battalion 2,000 kilometers in one day to respond to a crisis in the immediate neighborhood, as was done during the 1988 coup in the Maldives, would necessitate a lift capacity of 19 C-17 equivalents. Furthermore, the ability to do so with an entire brigade would require 55 C-17 equivalents. Although the former is notionally within the capacity of present airlift assets, questions persist about the condition of these aircraft, raising doubts about the military's capacity in an emergency.[72] Achieving the latter target by 2012 appears unrealistic because acquiring the equivalent of 55 C-17s would cost an estimated $9.1 billion, not including spare parts and maintenance. Against an IAF procurement budget of $4.19 billion, even if these aircraft were phased in over the next decade, it would still tie up 20% of the IAF's annual budget for new transport aircraft for the period.[73]

In terms of amphibious lift, the navy's present ability to move 3,000 troops plus vehicles and equipment is centered on the INS *Jalashva* (Sanskrit: Sea Horse), a 16,900-ton, American-built Landing Platform Dock

69. Sanjeev Bedi, "Strategic Role of Air Power," *Air Power Journal* 3:2 (Summer 2008), p. 42.

70. "IAF Aircraft to Carry Relief Supplies to Lebanon," *Indian Express*, August 12, 2006; "IAFs Largest Ever across the Border Relief Missions to Myanmar, China," Asian News International, May 27, 2008; "IAF Flies Medical Team, Aid to Sri Lanka," Indo-Asian News Service, May 22, 2009.

71. Gurmeet Kanwal, "Get behind Enemy Lines," *Strategic Affairs* (August 2008), pp. 22–23.

72. Pandey, "Indian Air Force of the Future."

73. Hackett, *The Military Balance, 2010*, p. 351.

(LPD) that can transport nearly 1,000 soldiers and six medium helicopters. Acquired in 2007, the *Jalashva* addresses India's lack of heavy sea-lift and mass-landing capability, while also providing a potential command-and-control platform for fleet operations in an amphibious landing or emergency response scenario. There is great interest in acquiring more LPDs through a combination of foreign acquisition and indigenous development. The present complement of Magar-class Landing Ship Tanks—which can transport 500 men or 15 armored vehicles—will be supplemented by four new amphibious assault ships.[74]

In line with these developments, a joint doctrine for amphibious warfare was developed by the tri-service Integrated Defence Staff and tested in exercises in 2005 and 2007. Earlier this year, the army formally stood up a dedicated amphibious brigade, the 3,000-man 91 Infantry Brigade based at Thiruvananthapuram, which is expected to form the core of a larger amphibious force in the future.[75] The navy has expressed a desire to double the size of its own Marine Commando Force, which focuses on maritime counterterrorism operations and offshore raids, from its present strength of 2,000.[76] Yet, such efforts will likely be hindered by budgetary constraints.

The *Jalashva*, operating together with one of the new carriers and a pair of Landing Ship Tanks, provides roughly the same size amphibious force as a typical U.S. Marine Expeditionary Unit in terms of deployable troops, armored vehicles, fighter aircraft, and helicopters. With proper logistical support and training, this force could provide India with an expeditionary intervention force that could respond to contingencies or crises of limited scope or duration in its "extended neighborhood." As with the carrier battle groups discussed above, the ability to operate close to hostile shores requires assistance from surface vessels with advanced anti-submarine and anti-aircraft capabilities. Should the Indian military reach its target amphibious lift capacity of 10,000 personnel, which would require both new amphibious platforms and more amphibious-ready troops, New Delhi would notionally be able to mount an operation like the 1983 U.S. intervention in Grenada. Similarly, it could respond to a major humanitarian crisis or non-combatant evacuation

74. "Indian Navy Seeks Second Troop Carrier from U.S.," *News Post India*, July 14, 2007, <http://www.newspostindia.com/report-7326>, accessed January 12, 2010; Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, p. 257; author's interview with defense journalist, New Delhi, July 2009.

75. Sujan Dutta, "U.S. Marines Model for Amphibious Force," *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), January 29, 2009.

76. "India," *Jane's World Navies,* June 26, 2009, p. 9.

mission. This would go a long way toward Admiral Mehta's stated goal of playing a constabulary role in the Indian Ocean littoral region.[77]

The army's ability to conduct expeditionary operations is no doubt enhanced by its long history of involvement in U.N. peacekeeping missions, which provides practical experience in small-unit operations as well as support functions: intelligence, medical, logistics, transportation, and engineering. However, one should not take the parallel too far because traditional peacekeeping operations are conducted in more-benign environments—which makes deployment, logistical support, and intelligence gathering significantly easier.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to both conventional wisdom and the beliefs of some Indian officials, since Independence India's armed forces have undertaken a range of power projection missions, and they will likely do so again in the future. While India may lack revisionist territorial aims requiring the capacity to conquer foreign lands, it does not necessarily follow that projecting military force abroad is not part of the Indian psyche. On the other hand, while strategic thinkers both inside and outside the Indian military have identified ambitious power projection goals for all three branches of the armed forces, these objectives appear to be much more aspirational than achievable in the near-term. The ability to project sea power ashore, at least through the next decade, will remain confined to attacking soft targets or providing limited air support to amphibious operations. The induction of advanced fighter aircraft makes precision strikes across South Asia a viable prospect. However, the lack of significant refueling tanker capacity promises to limit the projection of air power in the extended neighborhood to symbolic, as opposed to substantive, operations. Finally, limited long-range mobility, by either sea or air, and an inability to operate in high-threat environments in the face of sophisticated anti-access forces will likely constrain India's land power projection to its immediate neighborhood.

In this new century, it is likely that economic strength, rather than military prowess, will be the real measure of state power. In an increasingly integrated world, the use of military force will not necessarily secure economic gain and

---

77. Singh, *Indian Defence Yearbook 2009*, p. 267.

could easily undermine it. However, this is not to suggest that military force will not have any utility in coming years. While New Delhi may not currently have the global interests of a superpower, as a rising regional hegemon, it would not be surprising for India to seek sufficient military capacity to retain foreign-policy autonomy, prevent the emergence of a power vacuum in a neighboring state, or resist the encroachment of an extra-regional power into South Asia or even its broader "extended neighborhood." Given the fungibility of military power projection platforms, India's limited but growing power projection capability will soon give it the capacity to help police the global commons nearby, respond to humanitarian disasters, and play a more responsible role in its own region and beyond. As these capabilities continue to expand, there may come a time, in the words of Rahul Gandhi, when "we stop being scared about how the world will impact us, and we step out and worry about how we will impact the world."[78]

78. Giridharadas, "Land of Gandhi Asserts Itself as Global Military Power."