

Event Report

Maritime and Human Security in the Indo-Pacific Region: Perspective from India

Contextual Background

On 6 February 2026, the Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC) and the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) co-organised a special online discussion featuring Sreeradha Datta, Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P Jindal Global University. A leading analyst of South Asian politics, regional diplomacy, and Indo-Pacific security, Prof. Datta has held distinguished international fellowships. Her extensive body of work spans over a hundred publications and several monographs, among them include important works like the *Act East Policy and Northeast India (2021)*, *Caretaking Democracy: Political Process in Bangladesh, 2006-08 (2009)*, and *The Northeast: Complexities and Its Determinants (2004)*.

This report summarises Prof. Datta's presentation, which offered a comprehensive examination of India's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy, the pressures shaping regional security, and the structural realities informing New Delhi's choices. Her lecture situated India within a rapidly transforming Indo-Pacific marked by intensifying great-power competition, maritime insecurity, arms modernisation, and expanding non-traditional threats. Through this lens, she outlined how India's strategic posture is shaped simultaneously by continental pressures along the Himalayan frontier, maritime contestation in the Indian Ocean, and shifting alignments across East and Southeast Asia.

Prof. Datta's analysis illuminated the interplay of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and India's emerging role as a net security provider, while emphasising the deepening convergence between traditional deterrence questions and non-traditional challenges such as cyber disruption, climate stress, public-health vulnerabilities, and irregular migration. By tracing these intersecting dynamics, her presentation provided a holistic understanding of the geopolitical, economic, and human-security forces redefining India's Indo-Pacific engagement.

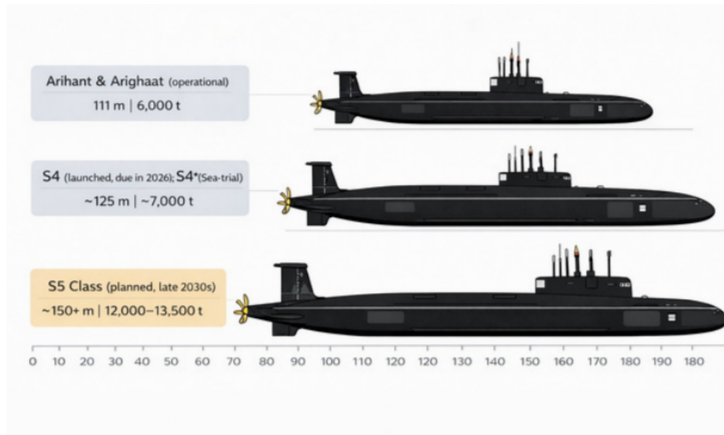
Key Takeaways 1: The Regional Deterrence Architecture Is Under Strain

The deterrence architecture in the Indo-Pacific faces increasing strain. The traditional system — anchored in U.S. alliances with Japan, Australia, and South Korea — has long underwritten extended deterrence in the region. However, rapid advances in China's conventional and nuclear capabilities, coupled with North Korea's intensifying missile programmes, are eroding confidence in the durability of this arrangement. As the credibility of extended deterrence comes under pressure, regional proliferation risks may grow. A South Korean decision to pursue an independent nuclear capability could trigger political debate in Japan regarding its own deterrent requirements, adding a new layer of instability to Northeast Asia. At the same time, the broader Indo-Pacific security environment already includes first-use posture nuclear armed states like Pakistan making nuclear stability an enduring concern.

For India, these dynamics demand a security calculus that weaves nuclear stability into its broader approach to regional competition. As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly defined by nuclear signalling, expanding arsenals, and doubts over extended deterrence, conventional balancing alone is insufficient. On the maritime domain, this may mean India bolstering its Nuclear Ballistic Missile Submarine (SSBN) capabilities and associated infrastructure to ensure credible deterrence and secure second-strike survivability in an increasingly complex strategic environment. India's *Arihant*-class is nearing completion, with the first two boats, *INS Arihant* and *INS Arighaat*, already operational. The third SSBN, *INS Aridhaman*, is in the final stages of sea trials; and the fourth, *S4**, is in the final stages of construction. The more capable next-generation *S5* class is planned to follow, with the lead boat expected by the late 2030s.



India's SSBN fleet in progress



Source: Author's illustration based on open-source data.

Key Takeaway 2: India's Indo-Pacific Strategy Is Anchored in the Indian Ocean

Against this backdrop of regional instability, India's Indo-Pacific engagement is fundamentally Indian Ocean-centric. While participating in Quad initiatives and broader Pacific discussions, New Delhi's primary focus remains bolstering its position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and ensuring that its core interests are not challenged. The Indian Ocean's sea lanes are critical to India's energy security and economic prosperity. However, China's expanding maritime presence, including frequent docking of "research" vessels suspected of military roles and investments linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, has heightened Indian concerns. Simultaneously, periodic intrusion from People's Liberation Army in India's land borders continues to persist.

India therefore faces a dual challenge; continental tensions in the Himalayas and maritime competition in the IOR. With approximately 85 percent of its military forces allocated to land security due to border standoffs, naval expansion is happening within constrained resources. This geographic and strategic reality shapes India's prioritisation of chokepoints as well as island territories such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and forward maritime presence.

Key Takeaway 3: Strategic Autonomy Remains Central — Even Within Partnerships

A recurring theme in the Prof. Datta's presentation was India's nuanced stance toward alliances. India is not a treaty ally of the U.S, yet it actively balances its relationship with Washington through issue-based

partnerships and the Quad. The approach reflects with India's non-aligned tradition, adapted to contemporary strategic realities.

Although India has signed foundational defence agreements with Washington and deepened cooperation through intelligence sharing, exercises, and defence trade, it remains cautious of overdependence. The presentation noted that recent U.S. strategic documents have not prioritised India, reinforcing the importance of diversified partnerships.

Accordingly, India has strengthened ties beyond the U.S, including landmark security and defence cooperation with the European Union, expanding collaboration with France in the Indian Ocean, and sustaining engagement with Japan, Australia, ASEAN states, and Gulf countries. Trade figures further demonstrate diversification, with India-EU trade surpassing India-U.S. and India-China trade in 2025. Strategic autonomy, therefore, is not isolationism. It is calibrated multi-alignment, designed to hedge against volatility while preserving independent decision-making.

Key Takeaway 4: India's Strategy Is a Deliberate Balancing Act Between Deterrence and Cooperation

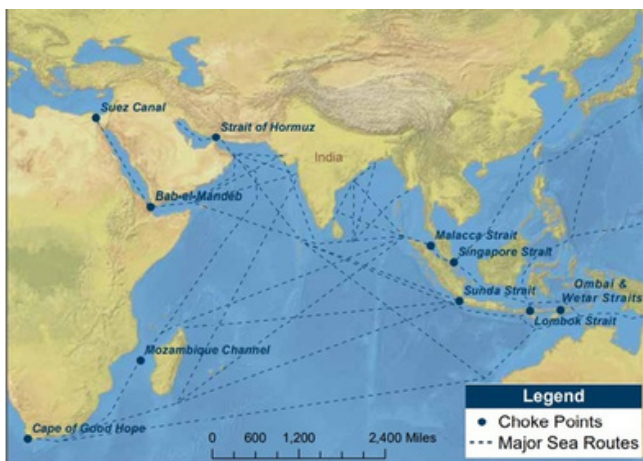
Building on its commitment to strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships, India's broader Indo-Pacific approach is characterised by a deliberate balancing act. On the one hand, India is strengthening military capabilities and partnerships to deter coercion. On the other, it champions cooperative frameworks addressing shared challenges. For example, New Delhi supports United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and peaceful dispute resolution as normative pillars of a rules-based order. Simultaneously, it engages through forums such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), ASEAN-led mechanisms, and the Quad, shaping agendas that range from critical minerals supply chains to marine environmental protection. All initiatives — defence deals, economic corridors like India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), or humanitarian assistance — ultimately serve India's core objective; ensuring a stable regional environment that protects trade routes, energy flows, and sovereign interests.

Key Takeaway 5: India Is Strengthening Maritime Capabilities and Acting as a Net Security Provider

This dual commitment to deterrence and cooperative engagement naturally extends into the maritime domain, where India has sought not only to safeguard its interests but also to assume wider regional responsibilities. The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, launched in 2015, provides the strategic and normative foundation for this role, outlining an agenda centred on maritime stability, collective action, and regional capacity building.

This vision is being operationalised through significant defence modernisation and an expanding maritime footprint. Indigenous platforms such as the aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, enhanced anti-submarine warfare capabilities, the induction of MQ-9B Reaper drones, and increasingly complex forward deployments – from patrols in the Strait of Malacca to anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and participation in exercises like Talisman Sabre—reflect India's growing reach and interoperability. Such progression has transitioned India into the role of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean.

Key Choke Points in the Indian Ocean



Source: Baruah, Darshana M. India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 22.

India's responsibilities as a net security provider were underscored in 2024 during Operation Sankalp, when the Navy deployed more than ten warships, including guided-missile destroyers and frigates, to protect commercial shipping from Houthi-linked attacks, the largest such deployment by any country. This operational posture is reinforced by institutional mechanisms such

as the establishment of Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, Delhi and signing of white-shipping agreements with several countries, in order to deepen maritime domain awareness and strengthen regional trust.

Key Takeaway 6: Non-Traditional Security Threats Are Structurally Transforming the Maritime Domain

While India's strengthened maritime capabilities and growing role as a net security provider address the traditional, state-centric dimensions of Indo-Pacific competition, the region's insecurity is simultaneously being reshaped by an expanding set of non-traditional threats. The presentation underscored that maritime insecurity in the Indo-Pacific stems from two principal sources: intensifying strategic competition and a wide spectrum of non-traditional threats.

Beyond military rivalries, challenges such as piracy, illegal and unreported fishing, organised maritime crime, irregular migration, and environmental degradation increasingly shape the governance landscape. Cyber threats add another layer of vulnerability; India's rapid digital expansion has heightened exposure to transnational cyber disruptions, reinforcing the need for whole-of-government coordination and collaborative resilience frameworks. Public health security, laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic, remains uneven across the region, with geopolitical competition often complicating cooperative responses. Climate security further deepens this complexity.

As Prof. Datta noted, India's climate-security discourse is shaped by domestic developmental priorities as well as geopolitical debates. She highlighted former Permanent Representative of India to the U.N T.S. Tirumurti's critique that developed countries have failed to meet their climate-finance commitments, and that efforts to conflate climate with security frequently obscure this shortfall, a key indicator of how India positions itself in global climate discussions.

Prof. Datta also drew attention to Indian narratives linking climate change to cross-border migration, particularly from Bangladesh, where climate-induced disasters and resource stress are seen as amplifying irregular flows.

These intersections of environmental pressures with traditional security concerns illustrate the multidimensional nature of regional stability. Consequently, India's Indo-Pacific vision must integrate maritime deterrence with environmental, cyber, and human-security considerations to effectively address the region's evolving threat landscape.

CONCLUSION

The ISDP-IPRC discussion with Professor Datta offered a coherent and layered understanding of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific matters because it is the connective tissue of global trade and energy flows. Yet it is also a theatre of intensifying rivalry, evolving deterrence architectures, and proliferating non-traditional threats. In this environment, India's approach is neither alliance-driven nor isolationist. It is calibrated, interest-based, and Indian Ocean-anchored. Strategic autonomy remains foundational, even as partnerships have deepened. Nuclear stability, maritime domain awareness, and continental preparedness coexist within a dual-threat environment.

Crucially, India seeks not dominance but stability, positioning itself as a net security provider and advocate of an inclusive, rules-based order. Its balancing act between deterrence and cooperation reflects both structural constraints and strategic choice. In a nutshell, India's Indo-Pacific strategy is anchored in strengthening capabilities while broadening partnerships, defending sovereignty while providing public goods, and integrating traditional and human security into a comprehensive vision for regional stability.

Disclaimer: This report is solely based on the discussion and does not represent the views of either IPRC or ISDP.

This report has been produced with the support of Anubhav Shankar Goswami & Sonali Fernando



Find us on LinkedIn:

Indo-Pacific Research Centre, Murdoch University

IPRC@murdoch.edu.au

<https://www.murdoch.edu.au/research/iprc>



Indo-Pacific
Research Centre

The Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC)

The Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC) engages with the significant challenges of our century and in our region: socio-economic development, human security, and geo-strategic governance. We advance understanding about the political, economic, socio-cultural and environmental issues in the Indo-Pacific region. The IPRC undertakes multi- and trans-disciplinary research in the region and supports Murdoch University's engagement with the region. Our location on the west coast of Australia enables the centre to provide distinctive insights into the changes and challenges in the Indian Ocean Rim. Demand for contemporary understanding of the region and its challenges presents exciting opportunities for the IPRC to pursue research and engagement goals that enhance governmental, business, and civil society objectives in the region.

SPEAKER

Prof. Sreeradha Datta

Professor Sreeradha Datta is Professor, Jindal School of International Affairs at O.P Jindal Global University. She has been the recipient of international and national fellowships including Visiting Fellow, German Institute of Global Affairs, Hamburg;



Distinguished Indian Scholar Series, National Taiwan University, Taipei; International Leadership Visitors Programme, United States; The Shelton Kodikara Award for South Asian Strategic Studies, Colombo; and Visiting Fellow, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Professor Datta's publications include notable works like the Act East Policy and Northeast India (2021); Caretaking Democracy: Political Process in Bangladesh, 2006-2008 (2009); Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy (2004); and The Northeast Complexities and its Determinants (2004). She has also published over 100 articles in journals, edited volumes, newspapers, and academic websites.



Institute for Security &
Development Policy