



Truth Matters, We Verify

INCIDENT REPORT 2025

Karachi to Gwadar The Indian Myth of a Retreat

Published on:
Sunday, August 24, 2025

Fake News Watchdog

Email: info@fakenewswatchdog.org | **Web:** www.fakenewswatchdog.org



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About Us

Fake News Watchdog (FNW) is a global initiative dedicated to identifying, analyzing, and countering the spread of misinformation and disinformation in today's digital world. We stand at the forefront of the fight for truth, empowering individuals, media professionals, academic institutions, and civil society to navigate the increasingly complex information landscape with confidence and clarity.

Our Mission

Our mission is to detect and debunk false narratives, monitor disinformation trends, and strengthen public resilience through media literacy. Leveraging artificial intelligence, advanced fact-checking tools, and rigorous research methodologies, we work to uphold the principles of transparency, credibility, and informed public discourse.

Our Vision

We envision a world where access to accurate, verified information is a fundamental right, and where communities are equipped to question, verify, and challenge misleading content. A well-informed society is the cornerstone of democracy, and we are committed to fostering a culture where truth triumphs over manipulation.

What We Do

- **Fact-Checking Services:** Verifying claims circulating in media, politics, and public discourse.
- **Reputation Management:** Monitoring digital platforms for false or misleading content about our clients and delivering timely, evidence-based rebuttals to protect their public image and credibility.
- **Research & Trends Analysis:** Studying patterns in disinformation to inform public policy and education.
- **Educational Outreach:** Promoting media literacy through training, resources, and awareness campaigns.
- **Global Collaboration:** Partnering with international organizations, journalists, researchers, and digital rights advocates to build a united front against fake news.

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A Message from Our Team

At Fake News Watchdog, our mission is rooted in the belief that truth is not just a principle but a cornerstone of a thriving society. In an age where disinformation spreads faster than ever, the responsibility to uphold integrity in information is one we share collectively.

This report serves as both a reflection of the challenges we face and a call to action. It dives deep into the anatomy of disinformation, examining its sources, impact, and the societal vulnerabilities it exploits. By bringing these incidents to light, we aim to empower individuals, institutions, and policymakers with the insights necessary to recognize, combat, and prevent the spread of falsehoods.

Our work is not possible without the contributions of vigilant fact-checkers, dedicated researchers, and the trust of those who believe in a better-informed world. Together, we can build an ecosystem where truth has the power to outpace lies, fostering trust and accountability in every corner of society.

We hope this report inspires meaningful dialogue and decisive action. Thank you for standing with us in this crucial fight against misinformation.

– The Fake News Watchdog Team

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Copyright Statement

This white paper is intended for informational, academic, educational, media, and policy-making purposes. It explores the evolution and strategic redirection of India's space program from a development-focused initiative to one increasingly shaped by defense priorities.

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Disclaimer

Limitations for Independent Watchdogs

For us (Fake News Watchdog), timing is everything, during the Conflict (May 7–10, 2025) satellite images, naval radar tracks, eyewitness videos, AIS data, all available in near real-time. Journalists, think tanks, and OSINT groups were actively monitoring the situation. If at that point the Indian Government made this claim, it would be rather easier to cross-check. Governments face more accountability if challenged while events are still unfolding.

But when the claim is made after 100 Days in the incident, commercial satellite providers may not keep easily accessible archives without expensive requests. Social media posts, videos, and local eyewitness content may have been deleted or buried under newer content. Governments and media managers already shaped the narratives and may have reshaped the story, influencing public perception. Watchdogs like us need funds to purchase archived imagery from companies like Maxar or Planet Labs. Which hampers our work efficiency, depth and credibility. Please accept our sincere efforts. We are not against any one we stand with the truth.

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Executive Summary

This report investigates India's post-conflict narrative following the May 7–10, 2025 Arabian Sea crisis, during which Indian officials and media claimed that the Pakistan Navy abandoned Karachi and shifted operations toward the Iranian border. The analysis finds no credible evidence supporting this assertion and concludes that it reflects deliberate disinformation, serving political, psychological, and strategic purposes.

Disinformation as Statecraft

India's reliance on disinformation has evolved into a systemic tool for both domestic control and international projection. From the 2016 “surgical strikes” and 2019 Balakot airstrikes to the Galwan Valley clash, COVID-19 data management, and the Kashmir “normalcy” narrative, selective storytelling has been used to exaggerate achievements, suppress inconvenient realities, and sustain political legitimacy. The 2025 “Karachi retreat” claim follows this established pattern—an information substitute for a military stalemate.

Absence of Verifiable Proof

Despite bold claims, India released no satellite imagery, intercepted communications, radar records, or independent assessments to substantiate its allegations. By contrast, modern conflicts—from the Cuban Missile Crisis to Ukraine and MH17—demonstrate how verifiable evidence (satellite photos, SIGINT, radar, OSINT) underpins credible narratives. India's failure to present such proof exposes the “retreat” story as propaganda rather than fact.

Political, Military, and Digital Drivers

The campaign served multiple purposes:

- **Domestic politics** – bolstering nationalist sentiment and diverting attention from inflation, unemployment, and governance challenges.
- **Military prestige** – preserving the navy's image despite its inability to secure a decisive victory.
- **Digital suppression** – the unprecedented suspension of more than 100,000 social media accounts reflected the state's anxiety about controlling competing narratives.
- **Psychological pressure** – portraying Pakistan as weak to demoralize its public and undercut Karachi's centrality.
- **International signaling** – projecting maritime dominance to Gulf states, Iran, and global partners while masking operational limits.

Structural Naval Limits

Even had Pakistan withdrawn, India faced sharp constraints: the risks of escalation between nuclear states, vulnerabilities of large surface fleets to Pakistani submarines and minefields, logistical strain near Iranian waters, and the likelihood of international backlash. These structural limits explain why information warfare became a substitute for decisive action.

Contradictions and Backfire

The narrative faltered under scrutiny: delayed announcements, inconsistent versions across Indian outlets, Karachi's continued economic activity, and dissent from retired officers and opposition politicians. Instead of consolidating India's credibility, the campaign eroded it—reinforcing skepticism among domestic critics, OSINT communities, and international observers.

Broader Implications

The episode highlights the growing centrality of narrative warfare when material victories are absent. Yet in an era of open-source intelligence and heightened evidentiary



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standards, unsupported claims collapse quickly under scrutiny. The Indian claim of a Pakistani naval retreat from Karachi is best understood not as battlefield reality but as disinformation—an exercise in perception management. True strategic strength lies not in unverified media campaigns but in verifiable capability and transparent evidence.

Background

As the fog of war begins to lift, long-concealed realities come into view. During times of conflict, dissenting voices are often silenced under the labels of “anti-state,” “desh drohi,” or “ghaddar.” Governments, in many countries, engage in covert schemes sometimes justified by international obligations, but often driven by their own vested interests which they deliberately keep hidden from the public eye. It is in this space that whistleblowers play a critical role, exposing such instances and helping to distinguish verified truths from orchestrated disinformation.

As tracked by Fake News Watchdog, post May 2025, India Pakistan clashes, the same phenomena develops in India, an unprecedented surge of activity across India’s online ecosystem. Within days, hundreds of uncoordinated voices began surfacing on platforms like X, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TakaTak, Chingari, Moj, Josh, and Bolo Indya. These platforms became saturated with competing narratives, patriotic sloganeering, and deliberate disinformation campaigns. Many other spaces went untracked due to resource limitations, but the sheer scale was unprecedented.

The seriousness of the situation was reflected in the Indian government’s reaction. The Press Information Bureau (PIB) formally asked X and other platforms to suspend or block more than 100,000 accounts. accused of spreading misleading or “anti-national” content. This scale of intervention was without precedent in India’s digital history and signaled the government’s growing anxiety over its inability to contain competing stories online. What had previously been managed by a press briefing, an anchor-led show, or even state-sponsored cinema (India produces more than two thousand films annually) suddenly required extraordinary measures of digital suppression.

What made this moment extraordinary was the targeting of established voices to counter dissent. Unlike earlier instances where fringe critics were marginalized, this time well-known intellectuals, journalists, and defense figures were pulled into the narrative battle. In a dramatic display, prominent figures, from politician cum media person, Shashi Tharoor, actor Jaya Bachchan, writer Arundhati Roy, and editor Shekhar Gupta, Praveen

Swami the Print, to military leaders like Air Chief Marshal Amar Preet Singh and Chief of Defence Staff Anil Chauhan, were sacrificed to thrust forward as counterweights to dissenting voices.

Weaponizing Disinformation in Statecraft

Disinformation is not random or accidental, it is often used as a deliberate instrument of statecraft. In India's case, disinformation has emerged as a systematic tool for managing both domestic opinion and international perception. By exaggerating achievements, suppressing inconvenient facts, or reframing narratives, Indian authorities and aligned media outlets project strength and control in times of crisis.

This strategy serves two purposes. Domestically, it maintains political legitimacy by fostering patriotism, downplaying failures, and portraying the government as strong and decisive. Internationally, it creates favorable impressions of India's global role while delegitimizing opponents. Whether through traditional media, social platforms, or advanced techniques such as artificial intelligence-generated deepfakes, disinformation has become embedded in India's political and strategic communication.

Several key episodes demonstrate how India has employed disinformation, sometimes subtly through selective framing, and other times overtly through falsified claims or staged narratives. These cases reveal a broader pattern: disinformation is not just a wartime tactic but a recurring feature of India's domestic governance and foreign policy.

Case Studies

Balakot Airstrikes (2019)

After the Balakot strikes, Indian officials and media claimed that over 300 terrorists were killed in a Jaish-e-Mohammed camp. Independent investigations, including satellite analysis by Reuters and *The New York Times*, showed little physical damage. Still, the narrative generated a wave of nationalism and electoral support for the ruling party.

“Surgical Strikes” Narrative (2016)

Following the Uri attack, India announced “surgical strikes” across the Line of Control. Pakistan disputed the scale of the operation, and no independent evidence was released. Nonetheless, Indian media framed it as a major victory, reinforcing the government’s image as decisive and militarily capable.

Galwan Valley Clash (2020)

During the deadly clash with Chinese forces in Galwan Valley, Indian officials initially downplayed casualties. Only later, after foreign reporting and satellite evidence emerged, was the full scale acknowledged. The controlled release of information helped manage domestic anger and shielded the leadership from accusations of weakness against China.

COVID-19 Data Manipulation (2020–2021)

During the pandemic, authorities were accused of underreporting cases and deaths. Journalists and health experts exposed large discrepancies between official figures and crematorium/burial data. This selective reporting portrayed the government as more effective than it was in reality.

Farmers’ Protest (2020–2021)

Protesting farmers were labeled “Khalistani separatists” or “anti-national” in government-aligned campaigns. Fake cases, doctored videos, and misleading stories were spread to discredit farmer leaders and weaken public sympathy for the movement.

Kashmir After Article 370 (2019)

After revoking Article 370, India maintained that “normalcy” prevailed in Kashmir. Independent observers, however, documented curfews, communication blackouts, detentions, and rights abuses. The official narrative of stability clashed with on-the-ground realities but was amplified through strict media management.

2008 Mumbai Attacks

During and after the Mumbai terror attacks, false reports spread widely—including claims about the attackers' identities and affiliations. The “fog of war” environment showed how disinformation thrives during crises, shaping both domestic and global perceptions.

Operation Blue Star (1984)

Forged intelligence reports suggested foreign involvement in Sikh militancy, including alleged roles of Pakistan and the CIA. These claims helped justify Operation Blue Star and framed the issue in a way favorable to the state.

FATF Narrative on Pakistan

India's diplomatic messaging portrayed Pakistan as a hub of terrorism, which contributed to its continued presence on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list. Critics argue this framing often leaned into disinformation, presenting selective evidence while suppressing counter-narratives.

Operation Sindoor (2025)

During and after the Pahalgam attack, unrelated and AI-altered footage from conflicts abroad was circulated as “proof” of India's success. Deepfakes portraying enemy leaders conceding defeat were spread virally before fact-checkers could intervene. Studies showed that over two-thirds of media circulated during this period contained misleading or fabricated material.

Regional and International Narratives

India's disinformation strategies are not confined to its borders. They extend outward, influencing regional neighbors, distant partners, and even international institutions. These efforts often combine selective storytelling, media amplification, and diplomatic messaging to shape how India is perceived globally.

Maldives (2023) – The “India Out” Campaign

The presence of Indian military personnel in the Maldives became a focal point of political debate. Opposition leaders and activists accused India of infringing on the country’s sovereignty. In response, Indian media and state-aligned outlets framed the protests as manipulated or externally funded, downplaying the genuine domestic grievances that fueled the “India Out” campaign. The issue grew into a central theme in the Maldivian elections, illustrating how Indian narratives abroad can backfire when challenged by grassroots movements.

Fiji – Diaspora Influence and Political Coverage

In Fiji, where a significant Indo-Fijian community resides, Indian-linked narratives have often emphasized cultural ties and framed India as a protective patron. During times of political tension in Fiji, Indian media has sometimes portrayed events in ways that highlight ethnic divisions or overemphasize India’s role as a stabilizer. This narrative strategy reinforces India’s soft-power image while complicating local dynamics.

Nepal (2015) – The #BackOffIndia Hashtag

During Nepal’s constitutional crisis, India was accused of orchestrating a trade blockade to pressure the government. Social media campaigns under the hashtag #BackOffIndia highlighted widespread anger at perceived Indian interference. While Indian narratives framed the blockade as a security precaution, Nepali citizens viewed it as coercion, sparking long-lasting resentment.

Bangladesh – Election Narratives and Security Framing

Indian-aligned media often portrays Bangladesh’s domestic politics through the lens of security and extremism, emphasizing India-friendly governments as stabilizing while depicting opposition parties as risks to regional order. During 2018 elections, social content amplified narratives of Indian “support for democracy,” while minimizing reports of voter suppression and political crackdowns inside Bangladesh. This selective framing

helped sustain India's influence but also widened mistrust among opposition groups and civil society.

Afghanistan – Post-Withdrawal Narratives

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Indian media projected narratives positioning India as a reliable partner for Afghan stability, contrasting it with Pakistan's alleged links to extremist groups. Reports often exaggerated Indian aid successes while downplaying challenges faced by Indian projects. These narratives were less about influencing Afghans directly and more about shaping global perceptions of India as a stabilizing power in South Asia.

Turkey – Narrative Battles Over Alliances

Turkey's growing alignment with Pakistan has been a sensitive issue for India. Indian media has often framed Turkey as an unreliable NATO ally and amplified negative coverage of its domestic policies. Narratives portraying Turkey as an “aggressor” or “instigator” have circulated during diplomatic disagreements, especially over Kashmir, where Turkey has spoken in support of Pakistan. These campaigns aim to undermine Ankara's credibility in global forums.

Azerbaijan – Conflicts and Diaspora Messaging

During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, Indian-linked networks amplified narratives supporting Armenia, partly due to Azerbaijan's close ties with Turkey and Pakistan. Diaspora-linked media outlets circulated stories portraying Azerbaijan as an aggressor while portraying Armenia as a victim of coordinated hostility. This selective storytelling reflected India's strategic alignments rather than an objective reading of the conflict.

Kenya – Election Campaign Messaging

Indian-aligned media and diaspora groups in Kenya have been accused of shaping narratives during election cycles. Opposition leaders were sometimes portrayed as extremist threats, while ruling coalitions were presented as protectors of national unity.

These stories, distributed through social and digital platforms linked to Indian networks, blurred the line between independent reporting and strategic influence.

UAE – Distorted Coverage of Regional Affairs

Indian media outlets have occasionally oversimplified or misrepresented developments in Gulf states. Reports have sometimes exaggerated social tensions or mischaracterized regulatory changes, money laundry allegations which shaped public perceptions in both India and the Gulf. These narratives aligned with India's broader regional positioning, reinforcing the idea of India as a cultural and economic partner while downplaying frictions.

Saudi Arabia – Diplomatic Narrative Management

Through carefully curated press releases, speeches, and diplomatic visits, India has consistently portrayed itself as a benign, stabilizing partner in Saudi Arabia. By framing ties in terms of shared economic and security goals, Indian messaging suppresses sensitive issues such as condition of expat living in KSA labor rights or political frictions, as well as hiding anti Muslim Hindutva policies and condition of minorities in India, ensuring that its public image remains favorable.

European Countries – Influence Through “Indian Chronicles”

The EU DisinfoLab investigation revealed how “Indian Chronicles” operated across multiple European countries, using fake NGOs, fabricated journalists, and repurposed media outlets to push pro-India narratives and discredit Pakistan. These operations reached EU institutions, think tanks, and even the United Nations. By shaping debates in influential European capitals, India sought to maintain its image as a democratic partner while undermining adversaries.

Post-Conflict Narrative Control

Three months after the May 2025 naval standoff with Pakistan, Indian media began promoting a new storyline: that Pakistan had staged a retreat during Operation Sindoor, abandoning positions from Karachi to Gwadar. The claim was repeated across television, print, and digital platforms, presented as a decisive Indian success. However, closer examination reveals political motives, strategic calculations, and contradictions that expose this campaign as disinformation rather than a reliable account.

India's decision to construct this narrative months later was not accidental. It was driven by a battlefield stalemate, domestic political pressures, and the desire to preserve its image as a maritime power. With no tangible victory to showcase, the government and media attempted to rewrite the outcome. This case illustrates how, in modern conflicts, controlling perception can become as important as combat itself.

Absence of a Decisive Victory

The central problem was the lack of a clear military win. Both navies maneuvered aggressively, but neither crossed the maritime boundary. No exchange of fire took place, and Pakistani naval assets remained intact. India, despite its earlier claims, failed to damage or force a withdrawal of Pakistan's fleet. Remaining silent risked appearing weak, especially since previous governments had often portrayed bold successes. To fill this gap, narrative control became a substitute for battlefield results.

Political Pressures at Home

For decades, Indian governments have used military claims against Pakistan to boost nationalist sentiment. In 2025, with several key state elections approaching, the ruling party faced pressure to demonstrate strength. Launching a media campaign was a low-cost way to project dominance without escalating militarily.

The absence of celebratory news after the clash created a political vacuum. Opposition parties and independent analysts asked why a heavily resourced navy had failed to

achieve visible results. To counter this, the government encouraged media outlets to frame the standoff as a Pakistani retreat. Narrative control thus became a tool for political survival and reassurance.

Diverting Attention from Domestic Challenges

India in mid-2025 was struggling with rising inflation, unemployment, and criticism of governance. Disinformation campaigns targeting Pakistan have historically been used as a distraction from internal issues. The claim of a Pakistani “retreat” served as a convenient way to divert attention from domestic discontent and refocus public debate on national security.

Preserving the Image of Naval Superiority

India has invested heavily in modernizing its navy—aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and surveillance systems—with annual spending exceeding \$2.8 billion in 2024–25. These investments were justified on the basis of ensuring superiority over Pakistan in the northern Arabian Sea.

The May 2025 clash exposed the limits of this superiority. By reconstructing the story into a narrative of Pakistani retreat, policymakers sought to preserve the perception that India remains the region’s dominant maritime power, and that its modernization efforts are effective.

Psychological Pressure on Pakistan

The campaign also sought to weaken Pakistani morale. By suggesting that Karachi—the country’s economic hub—was vulnerable and that naval forces had been pushed toward Gwadar, Indian media aimed to create doubt within Pakistan about its defensive capabilities.

However, the effort largely failed. Earlier exaggerated claims, already discredited, had eroded trust in Indian reporting. Audiences at home and abroad became increasingly skeptical, limiting the impact of this psychological offensive.

Shaping International Perceptions

Narrative control extended beyond domestic politics. India has long portrayed itself as the guardian of regional sea lanes, seeking recognition as both a regional and global power. Yet the stalemate in Operation Sindoor undermined this image.

Despite possessing a larger, more advanced fleet, India could not decisively overcome Pakistan in a confined theater of operations. This raised doubts among Gulf states, Iran, and China about India's ability to protect critical sea routes. Reframing the clash as a Pakistani retreat was therefore also aimed at reassuring external partners and sustaining India's credibility as a security provider in the Arabian Sea.

When Propaganda Backfires

India's narrative campaign eventually backfired. Claims of striking Karachi and Islamabad, downing six Pakistani aircraft, and forcing a naval retreat all collapsed under scrutiny. None were supported by verifiable evidence.

In the competitive Indian media market, sensationalism often replaced accuracy. Channels rushed to outdo one another with dramatic claims, but this eroded credibility abroad. Instead of projecting strength, India appeared over-reliant on propaganda, damaging its reputation and raising doubts about its military claims.

Contradictions in the Campaign

a) Lack of Evidence

When India declared that Pakistan had fled Karachi's waters, neither the Indian Navy nor the Ministry of Defence presented any supporting material, no satellite imagery, no intercepted communications, and no verifiable operational assessments. In the absence of these, the claim remains anecdotal at best, and propaganda at worst.

To understand why, it is essential to examine what these evidentiary tools mean, how they are used in military intelligence, and why their absence undermines credibility visit the “Evidentiary Standards in Naval Warfare” section of this report.

b) Silence in the Immediate Aftermath

If Pakistan had truly retreated from Karachi to Gwadar, it would have been one of the greatest naval defeats in South Asian history. Yet Indian officials did not celebrate such a victory in May 2025. The claim only emerged three months later, raising doubts about its authenticity.

c) Conflict with Economic Realities

Karachi remained fully functional after the clash. Shipping and trade data showed normal activity, contradicting the claim that it had been abandoned.

d) Disunity Among Indian Commentators

Not all voices in India supported the official narrative. Retired naval officers, opposition politicians, and independent analysts questioned the claims, warning that spreading misinformation could damage India’s international standing.

e) Inconsistent Storytelling

Media outlets offered conflicting versions—some claimed a total retreat, others suggested a redeployment, while some spoke of abandoned coastal defenses. These inconsistencies exposed the story as a media fabrication rather than a coherent military assessment.

Evidentiary Standards in Naval Warfare

In contemporary warfare, truth is contested as fiercely in the information space as it is on the battlefield. Nowhere is this more evident than in the maritime domain, where the fog of war is compounded by the vastness of the sea and the difficulty of monitoring ship movements. States exploit this opacity through disinformation campaigns, selective leaks, and media-driven narratives to gain psychological and political advantage.

The May 7-10, 2025 Arabian Sea crisis illustrates this trend. During the standoff, Indian officials and media outlets claimed that Pakistan's Navy abandoned its security duty off Karachi and retreated toward the Iranian border. Yet no tangible proof accompanied these allegations: no satellite imagery, no intercepted communications, no radar records, and no independent verification. Such unsubstantiated claims highlight the central question this article explores: what constitutes credible, verifiable evidence in naval operations?

This section outlines the evidentiary standards that states, analysts, and independent observers use to assess maritime claims. Drawing on examples from both naval and land-based conflicts, it demonstrates that modern technology and open-source tools provide multiple pathways to validate-or debunk-strategic assertions.

Satellite Imagery as Evidence

Satellite imagery remains one of the most powerful tools for verifying naval movements. High-resolution optical and radar satellites can detect ship concentrations, port activity, and logistical trails.

If Pakistan's fleet had truly abandoned Karachi in May 2025, imagery could have shown:

- A sudden reduction in vessels docked at Karachi or Ormara naval bases.

- The appearance of Pakistani warships congregating near the Iranian maritime boundary.
- Fuel tankers and supply ships moving in the same direction, consistent with redeployment.

Both India and Pakistan have access to commercial satellite data providers like Maxar and Planet Labs, and India in particular operates a space program (visit Fake News Watchdog White-paper on Indian Satellite Program published on January 29, 2025¹).

The absence of even partial imagery raises doubts about India's claim. Historical precedent shows that states often release satellite evidence to reinforce narratives. During the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), The United States presented satellite photos of Soviet missiles in Cuba at the UN Security Council, turning intelligence into irrefutable public proof (Blight & Welch, 1998). Companies like Maxar continuously published imagery of Russian convoys and Russian troop buildups in Ukraine, corroborating Western intelligence assessments (Bellingcat, 2022). Satellite photos routinely show Chinese island construction and naval deployments, countering Beijing's official denials (Poling, 2019).

In the absence of such imagery, India's claim remains unsubstantiated rhetoric. Conversely, independent imagery showing Pakistani frigates, submarines, or fast attack craft still in Karachi during the alleged retreat would directly refute New Delhi's narrative.

Intercepted Communications (SIGINT)

Signals intelligence (SIGINT) the interception of radio chatter, encrypted orders, or radar emissions provides another powerful evidentiary tool. If Pakistan's fleet had received withdrawal orders, interceptor would likely show:

- Directives from Naval Headquarters in Islamabad to Karachi-based ships.
- Encrypted orders instructing redeployment.

¹ https://www.fakenewswatchdog.org/wp-content/uploads/Reports/WHITE_PAPER_India_Space_Program.pdf

- Sudden radio silence or frequency hopping, typical during sensitive operations.

India claims to have sophisticated SIGINT infrastructure, including coastal listening posts and space-based sensors. If New Delhi wished to prove its claim, it could have released redacted transcripts or audio snippets, as Allied Forces released intercepts of Iraqi communications and radar emissions to demonstrate impending operations in Gulf war (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). In Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Western intelligence frequently publicized Russian communications pointing to imminent attacks, shaping international opinion. Israeli Operations (1967 & 1973) Declassified intercepts later revealed preemptive assessments of Arab fleet deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean (Oren, 2002). In Pakistan's case, the absence of such evidence suggests India's claim was more psychological operation (PSYOPS) than factual reporting.

Radar and Electronic Surveillance

Modern navies rely on an extensive network of coastal radars, airborne patrol aircraft, and electronic surveillance systems. These tools detect warship movements, even when vessels disable their AIS (Automatic Identification System).

If Pakistan's fleet had sailed en masse toward Iran, such movement would likely have been tracked not only by India but also by regional powers. The Arabian Sea is closely monitored by U.S., European, and Gulf-state aircraft such as the P-8 Poseidon. A genuine relocation of Pakistan's fleet would almost certainly have been noted in allied surveillance reports.

During the Falklands War (1982), British use of radar intercepts confirmed Argentine aircraft and fleet movements, informing tactical decisions (Middlebrook, 2003). U.S. surveillance radars tracked Iranian naval assets in the Gulf, producing operational records used both militarily and diplomatically (Crist, 2013). That no radar data or allied reporting accompanied India's claim raises questions about its credibility.

Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) increasingly shapes naval assessments. AIS signals, commercial satellite imagery, and even geolocated social media posts provide verifiable data.

Bellingcat combined satellite images, social media videos, and metadata to demonstrate that a Russian Buk missile battery was moved into eastern Ukraine before the MH17 Shootdown (2014) incident (Higgins, 2016). Civilian satellite imagery and ship-tracking platforms regularly present Chinese coast guard and militia activity, countering official narratives (Poling, 2019).

Because of the tight control on media to report from Gaza, Plasticine, journalist globally use videos posted by civilians, relief workers and also by IDF personnel to explain war atrocities. Analysts used to verify drone strikes and troop movements in Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020) (Marten, 2021). If Pakistan's entire fleet shifted position, OSINT would likely leave traces, AIS gaps, abnormal pings, or local eyewitness accounts. Independent analysts could then verify or dispute India's narrative.

Logistics and Port Activity Evidence

A fleet cannot redeploy without substantial logistical preparation: fuel convoys, supply chains, and port-side activity. These indicators, visible even from afar, can corroborate naval movements.

Allied codebreakers and port surveillance identified German fleet deployments by monitoring resupply patterns during WWII. In Syrian Conflict (2015-) Western analysts tracked Russian naval reinforcements to Tartus by following logistical convoys and commercial shipping records (Kofman, 2019). If Karachi's docks showed no unusual refueling or resupply activity, India's claim of a mass Pakistani withdrawal becomes implausible.

Third-Party Military and Diplomatic Reporting

Maritime theaters are rarely monitored by only two states. Other navies and coastal states often possess independent data. The Arabian Sea is regularly observed by U.S., British, French, Chinese, and Gulf naval forces. If Pakistan's Navy had shifted closer to Iran, third-party confirmation through diplomatic channels, leaks, or even silence would carry significant weight.

Russian and Western navies routinely observed each other's deployments, with mutual reporting shaping global assessments in Syrian Civil War. Iran and Oman, with strong coastal surveillance, could have confirmed or denied unusual Pakistani fleet activity. Their lack of corroboration weakens India's assertion.

Independent Commercial Assessments

Commercial maritime intelligence firms such as Lloyd's List and MarineTraffic provide additional layers of verification. Insurance markets, traders, and shipping companies rely on accurate maritime records to assess risks. A Pakistani fleet relocation would alter insurance premiums and risk maps, prompting commercial reporting.

Historically, commercial data has exposed hidden naval deployments Iran Tanker Disputes of (2019), Lloyd's List tracked Iranian seizures and diversions of oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. Western firms routinely recorded Soviet naval and merchant fleet patterns, supplementing government intelligence (Till, 2013). That no such commercial alerts accompanied India's claim further underscores its dubious evidentiary basis.

The Problem of Rhetoric Without Proof

When states issue claims without evidence, they engage in psychological warfare rather than credible reporting. Naval operations, often hidden from civilian view, are particularly prone to manipulation. Such narratives aim to project dominance, humiliate adversaries, or reassure domestic audiences.

India's claim that Pakistan "fled Karachi" exemplifies this tactic. Without imagery, intercepts, radar data, or third-party verification, the allegation lacks substance. Worse, it risks undermining credibility: strategic audiences-foreign governments, military analysts, and informed journalists-demand rigorous evidentiary standards. In the information age, unsupported rhetoric is quickly challenged by open-source analysts and neutral observers.

Evidentiary standards in naval warfare are higher today than ever before. With satellites, intercepts, radar, OSINT, logistics data, and third-party assessments, states possess multiple tools to substantiate claims. The absence of such evidence suggests either that the claim is exaggerated for psychological effect or that it lacks factual basis altogether.

India's assertion during the May 2025 crisis illustrates the dangers of rhetoric without proof. By contrast, historical precedents-from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Russia-Ukraine war-show that verifiable evidence strengthens credibility and shapes global perception. In modern conflict, evidence is not a luxury; it is a strategic necessity. Without it, narratives risk collapse under scrutiny, damaging the very cause they were meant to advance.

Did Pakistan Navy Abandon Karachi?

An Analysis of India's Claim

Recently, Indian state-aligned media outlets claimed that the Pakistan Navy had abandoned its primary base in Karachi and shifted closer to the Iranian border, while Indian naval vessels lined up across the maritime frontier. This dramatic assertion, if true, would reshape the strategic balance in the Arabian Sea. Yet, it also raises three key questions:

- 1. What could India actually do in such a situation?**
- 2. What are the limitations on Indian action?**
- 3. Why would India still be unable to fully act on such claims?**

This article examines these three dimensions to assess the credibility of the narrative and the strategic realities behind it.

What India Could Do

If the Pakistan Navy had truly withdrawn from Karachi, the Indian Navy (IN) would gain several tactical and operational opportunities.

1. Violation of Pakistan's Maritime Space

By moving closer to the Pakistani coastline, the IN could attempt to enter Pakistan's territorial waters. Deploying destroyers, frigates, and submarines equipped with mid-range missiles, the IN could target coastal defense systems and infrastructure. Advanced sonar arrays, maritime patrol aircraft, and underwater sensors would give India better tracking of Pakistani movements, allowing it to build a stronger offensive posture.

2. Naval Blockade and Interdiction

The Indian Navy could enforce a blockade of Pakistani ports to disrupt sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This would severely restrict Pakistan's maritime trade, increasing financial and military strain. By issuing exclusion zones and coordinating with partners to raise insurance costs for Pakistan-bound cargo, India could make shipping prohibitively expensive and force Pakistan into costly countermeasures.

3. Long-Range Missile Strikes

Indian warships and submarines equipped with BrahMos cruise missiles could strike Pakistani naval bases, command centers, and coastal facilities. Such attacks would threaten both military and civilian infrastructure, creating heavy pressure on Pakistan.

4. Air Superiority and Naval Aviation

The aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya*, along with MiG-29K fighters, P-8I surveillance planes, and drones, would expand India's surveillance and strike capacity. Combined with support from the Indian Air Force, India could conduct air strikes against Pakistani assets both at sea and inland.

5. Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW)

Pakistan's submarines represent a major threat in any conflict. The Indian Navy could deploy frigates, corvettes, and long-range patrol aircraft to hunt and track these submarines. While difficult, such operations would still give India a chance to weaken Pakistan's undersea deterrent.

6. Amphibious Operations

If Pakistani defenses were degraded, India could consider amphibious assaults to capture sections of Pakistan's coastline. Such operations would seek to create a symbolic victory and demonstrate dominance.

7. Psychological Warfare and Information Operations

Even without large-scale combat, India could exploit the narrative for propaganda. By presenting manipulated Automatic Identification System (AIS) data and fabricated reports, India could portray Pakistan as retreating or hiding. This disinformation would aim to demoralize Pakistan's public, shake global confidence in Pakistan's military, and reinforce India's image of restraint and superiority.

What India Could Not Do?

Despite these possibilities, there are serious limitations on what India could realistically achieve.

1. Sustaining Operations

Extended deployment of large fleets far from Indian ports would stretch logistics. Fuel, weapons, and maintenance would create a vulnerable supply chain, making long-term operations unsustainable.

2. Total Destruction of a Dispersed Fleet

A dispersed Pakistani Navy, relying on submarines, fast attack craft, and mines, would be extremely difficult to eliminate. These assets thrive in littoral waters, where detection is challenging.

3. Risk of Violating Iranian Waters

If Pakistan's Navy moved closer to the Iranian border, India would face a major diplomatic dilemma. Any intrusion into Iranian waters would provoke condemnation, possible retaliation, and international sanctions.

4. Exposure to Land-Based Air and Missile Threats

Indian naval forces operating near Pakistan's coast would remain vulnerable to land-based aircraft, missiles, and coastal defenses. Operating carriers or surface ships within strike range would be highly risky.

5. Civilian Casualties and International Backlash

Large-scale naval strikes near Karachi, a megacity, risk massive civilian harm. The resulting humanitarian crisis would trigger international condemnation and pressure against India.

6. Seizing Karachi

Indian media has previously claimed strikes against Karachi, but a direct assault on the city is implausible. Karachi's defenses, including radars, surface-to-air missiles, and coastal artillery, make such an operation militarily infeasible and politically unacceptable.

7. Difficult Geography

The hydrography of the Indus Delta and Sir Creek region favors Pakistani defenders. Shallow waters, silted channels, and cluttered sonar environments make submarine detection nearly impossible and complicate Indian fleet maneuvers.

8. Submarine Bastions and Dynamic Minefields

Pakistan's AIP-equipped submarines and AI-driven minefields near the Makran coast create lethal zones for large surface ships. Any Indian attempt to advance would encounter layered defenses designed to inflict disproportionate damage.

Why India Could Not Act Decisively

Even if Pakistan had abandoned Karachi, several deeper strategic constraints would still prevent India from acting fully.

1. Escalation Risks

Both Pakistan and India are nuclear-armed states. Any large-scale attack could spiral into a wider war with catastrophic consequences. The threat of escalation remains the strongest deterrent against Indian military adventurism.

2. International Law and Diplomatic Costs

Launching unprovoked strikes against Pakistan, particularly near Iranian waters, would violate international law. India would face condemnation from the United Nations, pressure from major powers, and potential isolation from global trade networks.

3. Information Warfare vs. Reality

The original claim itself reflects information warfare. Indian media often amplifies dramatic stories for domestic political purposes. Such narratives are less about actual military readiness and more about shaping perceptions.

4. Lack of Clear Military Objective

If Pakistan dispersed its fleet, destroying it would require enormous resources with limited returns. Without a clear, achievable goal, such operations would waste assets and risk unacceptable losses.

5. Enormous Costs

Sustained naval operations, fuel consumption, ammunition expenditure, and maintenance would impose massive financial burdens on India. The long-term social and economic consequences would far outweigh any temporary advantage.

6. Domestic Politics and Public Opinion

Indian leadership faces constant pressure to showcase toughness against Pakistan. Yet when no tangible results are visible, propaganda replaces reality. This explains why Indian media claims did not gain traction internationally—they were designed for domestic consumption, not global legitimacy.

7. Pakistan's Defensive Edge

Pakistan's submarines, mine networks, and coastal defenses make its waters highly dangerous for an aggressor. Any Indian carrier group or surface fleet moving too close would risk significant attrition, discouraging bold maneuvers.

The Indian claim that Pakistan's Navy abandoned Karachi is less a reflection of military reality and more a product of narrative warfare. While India does have the capacity to project power and attempt blockades, missile strikes, or propaganda campaigns, the risks of escalation, logistical strain, and international backlash outweigh any potential advantage.

In truth, India cannot decisively neutralize Pakistan's Navy without triggering a dangerous escalation or suffering disproportionate losses. This is why such claims remain confined to controlled media outlets rather than verified by independent sources.

The episode demonstrates that in South Asia, perception management is often as important as military maneuvering. For India, projecting dominance through media narratives may be easier than achieving it on the battlefield.

Sagar to Mahasagar

The True Cost of India's Naval Ambitions

India's naval doctrine has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. What was once framed under the relatively modest concept of *SAGAR*—"Security and Growth for All in the Region," symbolizing India's maritime role in the Indian Ocean—has now expanded into the grander idea of *Mahasagar*, an ocean-spanning vision. This shift is celebrated in Indian media as a marker of prestige, portraying the country as a rising global power prepared to assert its influence far beyond its shores.

However, a closer look suggests that this ambitious shift is not entirely about national defense or regional security. Instead, it appears deeply intertwined with the interests of domestic procurement lobbies, international defense contractors, and foreign manufacturers. The rhetoric of pride and security often masks a reality in which India's scarce resources are being channeled into costly projects that serve a narrow elite rather than the pressing needs of its citizens.

The Business of Naval Power

The *Mahasagar* doctrine calls for the creation of a true blue-water navy. A force capable of sustained operations across oceans, far from Indian shores. Such a fleet relies on large capital-intensive platforms: aircraft carriers, destroyers, nuclear-powered submarines, and technologically advanced support vessels.

While this may sound like a logical progression for a nation seeking global power status, it aligns almost perfectly with the commercial interests of the global defense industry. Foreign shipbuilders and arms suppliers have long sought a foothold in the Indian market, and the promise of multi-billion-dollar naval procurement programs provides them with exactly that. Indian procurement lobbies, which form an opaque but powerful network of intermediaries in New Delhi, play a decisive role in ensuring that contracts worth billions of dollars are awarded. For these brokers, the outcome is mutually beneficial: defense

companies secure long-term lucrative deals, while facilitators enjoy substantial commissions and political influence.

The result is a cycle where business interests drive military doctrine. Instead of being guided solely by strategic necessity, naval expansion becomes an enterprise in itself—an end that justifies ever-increasing expenditure.

The Case of the Third Aircraft Carrier

Nothing illustrates this business-driven approach better than the debate over India's proposed third aircraft carrier. At an estimated cost of more than \$8 billion, excluding lifetime operational expenses, the project represents one of the single largest investments in naval hardware.

Proponents argue that a three-carrier navy is essential if India is to dominate the Indian Ocean Region and maintain a credible global presence. Yet, from a military standpoint, the value of such an asset is highly debatable. Modern carriers, though imposing symbols of power, are increasingly vulnerable to advanced anti-ship missiles, long-range precision strike systems, and stealthy submarines. In a regional conflict—say, with Pakistan—the operational utility of a third carrier would be marginal at best. Its true role lies in power projection thousands of miles away, a capability that may not correspond to India's immediate strategic priorities.

The persistence of this project, despite its questionable military necessity, reveals the deeper logic of prestige and profit. Carriers are highly visible symbols of power, easy to parade before domestic audiences and international partners. They embody a sense of pride, reinforcing the narrative of India as a great power. But they also provide unmatched opportunities for large-scale contracts, keeping the defense industry and its intermediaries well-fed.

National Pride and Public Reality

The justification for this naval expansion is often couched in patriotic language. Military modernization is framed as a matter of national pride, a way of placing India “at the top” of global hierarchies. This narrative resonates strongly with the public, tapping into deep-rooted aspirations for recognition and respect on the world stage.

Yet, beneath the surface, the contrast between expenditure on naval ambitions and the everyday realities of India’s population is stark. Over 300 million people in India still live without access to clean water, reliable electricity, or adequate sanitation. More than a quarter of the population lacks basic toilet facilities, while millions survive in urban slums without secure housing or healthcare.

At the same time, vast sums are allocated not only to aircraft carriers but also to overseas naval stations, advanced intelligence facilities, and high-profile space missions. These projects undoubtedly showcase technological capability, but their benefits to the common citizen are negligible. For a country where poverty and inequality remain defining challenges, the prioritization of costly naval hardware represents a troubling misalignment of national priorities.

The Military-Industrial Complex in India

The *Mahasagar* doctrine is not an isolated phenomenon. It represents a textbook example of the military-industrial complex at work: a convergence of interests among defense industries, government officials, and military leaders that creates a self-perpetuating cycle of demand for ever more sophisticated weapons.

What makes this dynamic particularly problematic is the way it is sold to the public. Grand naval projects are presented as matters of national security, as though failure to pursue them would endanger the country’s future. In reality, the beneficiaries are relatively few: contractors who win billion-dollar deals, brokers who facilitate them, and political actors who enjoy the symbolic prestige of high-profile announcements.

This cycle crowds out more practical and cost-effective solutions. For example, instead of an additional aircraft carrier, India could invest in fast attack craft, coastal defense batteries, and patrol boats. These assets, though less glamorous, are better suited to defending India's actual maritime vulnerabilities, particularly against asymmetric threats. Moreover, investment in indigenous innovation—such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), and advanced electronic warfare capabilities—would yield stronger asymmetric defenses while also building local industrial capacity.

Strategic Disparity: India and Pakistan

India's naval trajectory also needs to be understood in comparison with Pakistan's approach. India seeks to build a blue-water navy designed for power projection far beyond its immediate coastline. Aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and large destroyers reflect this ambition to shape the wider Indian Ocean and to balance against major global powers, most notably China.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has structured its navy primarily around a green-water doctrine focused on coastal defense and sea denial. Rather than matching India ship-for-ship, Pakistan relies on submarines, anti-ship missiles, and fast attack craft to create a potent asymmetric threat. This makes sense given its resources and strategic needs. Its primary goal is to deny India freedom of action near Pakistani shores rather than to operate across oceans.

This contrast highlights the divergence in priorities. While India aspires to be a global player, Pakistan remains focused on protecting its territorial waters. Both strategies reflect rational choices given each country's circumstances, but the mismatch underscores the risks India faces in pouring resources into global prestige projects rather than immediate security concerns.

A Question of Priorities

The central issue in the debate over the *Mahasagar* doctrine is not whether India should have a strong navy—maritime security is undoubtedly vital for a country so dependent on sea lanes. The real question is about priorities. Is national security best served by investing billions in high-visibility platforms designed for distant operations, or by focusing on cost-effective solutions that address the most likely threats?

Furthermore, can a nation that continues to struggle with poverty, inadequate healthcare, and failing infrastructure afford to pour such vast resources into prestige-driven projects? Each dollar spent on a third aircraft carrier or a nuclear submarine is a dollar not spent on schools, hospitals, or clean water systems. The opportunity cost is immense, and yet it is rarely part of the public debate.

National Pride or National Need?

The shift from *SAGAR* to *Mahasagar* is more than a change in doctrine; it is a reflection of India's struggle to balance ambition with reality. On paper, a blue-water navy capable of global power projection is an impressive goal. In practice, it risks becoming a costly distraction that enriches contractors and intermediaries while leaving the fundamental needs of the population unmet.

Military power is important, but it should not come at the expense of human development. True national strength lies not in the number of carriers or submarines a country can deploy, but in the well-being of its people. A doctrine that prioritizes prestige over practicality, business interests over social welfare, may ultimately weaken rather than strengthen India's long-term position.

The debate over the *Mahasagar* doctrine, therefore, is not simply about ships and budgets. It is about what kind of nation India aspires to be one that invests in its people, or one that seeks prestige at their expense. Until this fundamental question is addressed, the true cost of India's naval ambitions will continue to be borne not by the oceans it



Truth Matters, We Verify

seeks to dominate, but by the billion plus citizens still waiting for the basics of a dignified life.

White Elephant: Power, Prestige, and Vulnerability

For much of the twentieth century, aircraft carriers, particularly nuclear-powered supercarriers—were considered the ultimate expression of naval dominance. They symbolized not only military power but also technological sophistication and national prestige. A carrier's ability to launch air operations across vast distances allowed countries to project force anywhere in the world.

Yet in the twenty-first century, the role of carriers is being reevaluated. Their immense size and complexity make them extraordinarily expensive to construct, maintain, and defend. More importantly, advances in long-range precision weapons now expose these giant vessels to unprecedented threats. This has led analysts to question whether supercarriers remain a sound investment in modern naval strategy or whether they risk becoming liabilities and symbols of past glory rather than assets for the future.

Global Investment in Carrier Fleets

Despite concerns about cost and vulnerability, several countries continue to invest in carrier programs. The United States remains the undisputed leader, operating 11 nuclear-powered supercarriers alongside 9 amphibious assault ships capable of functioning as light carriers. These ships are the centerpiece of America's global reach, sustaining the doctrine of being able to fight two major conflicts simultaneously and projecting power across oceans (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2023).

China has quickly risen as the second-largest carrier power, with three carriers in service: the *Liaoning*, *Shandong*, and the recently launched *Fujian*. A fourth carrier is already under construction, signaling Beijing's determination to challenge U.S. dominance in the Pacific (Cordesman, 2023). India, meanwhile, operates two carriers and has expressed interest in commissioning a third, despite fierce domestic debate over its feasibility.

Other nations maintain smaller but still significant carrier fleets. Russia's sole carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, has been plagued by operational setbacks and remains under repair. France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, and South Korea operate smaller carriers or helicopter carriers, many designed for STOVL (short take-off and vertical landing) aircraft. Even Türkiye, with its strong shipbuilding industry, has opted for an amphibious assault ship—the *TCG Anadolu*—which is configured for helicopters and drones rather than fixed-wing jets (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2023). This global persistence underscores that carriers continue to be viewed as strategic assets, even as their vulnerabilities grow more apparent.

Carriers as Prestige and Burden

Historically, carriers embodied national power and served as instruments of diplomacy. However, they are increasingly criticized as potential “white elephants.” The sheer expense of modern carriers raises difficult questions about cost-effectiveness.

The most striking example is the U.S. Ford-class supercarrier, each costing more than \$13 billion to build, with an estimated \$700 million in annual maintenance (O'Rourke, 2023). Beyond construction, carriers require thousands of crew members, advanced logistics, and constant resupply. Critics argue that such vast sums could be redirected toward a larger fleet of smaller, more agile platforms—such as submarines, frigates, and unmanned systems—that offer distributed lethality at a fraction of the cost.

This financial dilemma forces policymakers into trade-offs: should resources fund a few massive platforms with global visibility, or should they be invested in a diversified fleet better suited to modern, high-threat environments?

The Challenge of Defending Carriers

Defending a supercarrier is a formidable task. Its enormous radar cross-section makes it an unmistakable target, visible to adversaries long before it detects threats. While carriers

operate at the heart of Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs)—protected by cruisers, destroyers, frigates, and submarines—they remain vulnerable to modern precision weapons.

The emergence of hypersonic missiles poses the greatest threat. Russian systems such as the 3M22 Zircon and Chinese “carrier-killer” missiles like the DF-21D and DF-26 can travel at extreme speeds, evading defenses and striking from ranges that exceed the operational radius of a carrier’s air wing (Missile Defense Project, 2022). Submarines armed with advanced torpedoes add another dimension of danger.

The result is a paradox: while carriers are designed to project power, they may be forced to operate farther from hostile shores, diminishing the effectiveness of their aircraft. This undermines the very logic of carrier warfare.

Lessons from Exercises and Real-World Incidents

The vulnerability of carriers is not just theoretical; exercises and real-world scenarios have repeatedly highlighted their weaknesses.

One widely cited incident occurred in 1995 during Exercise *Inspired Alert* with Pakistan. A Pakistan Air Force Mirage carrying a simulated Exocet missile reportedly penetrated the defensive perimeter of the USS Abraham Lincoln. The exercise demonstrated that even a determined regional air force, equipped with modern anti-ship missiles, could expose gaps in a carrier’s layered defenses (Khan, 2015).

In actual conflicts, U.S. carriers have also been forced to adapt. During the Iraq War, American naval planners were concerned about Iraqi missile capabilities. To minimize risks, carriers operated farther offshore, reducing the threat but also limiting their strike reach (Allison, 2004). Such adjustments reveal an implicit acknowledgment: carriers are not invulnerable and may even impose self-limiting operational constraints.

Strategic Shifts: Distributed and Asymmetric Forces

These vulnerabilities have spurred new thinking in naval strategy. Instead of concentrating combat power in a handful of massive platforms, many analysts advocate for distributed lethality and dispersal of strike capability across numerous smaller, harder-to-target assets.

This includes greater reliance on:

- Submarines, which can strike from stealth.
- Frigates and corvettes, offering flexibility at lower cost.
- Unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles, which reduce risk to human crews.
- Land-based missile systems, capable of threatening enemy fleets from shore.

For countries like China and Russia, developing “carrier-denial” capabilities has become central to their strategies. For the U.S. and India, which remain invested in carriers, the challenge is finding ways to adapt to this shifting environment without abandoning decades of doctrine.

Carriers in the Future: Symbols or Survivors?

The debate over carriers ultimately reflects a broader tension between tradition and innovation. On one hand, carriers remain unmatched in their ability to project air power globally, deliver humanitarian aid, and act as visible symbols of strength. On the other, they are becoming increasingly difficult to justify in a world where technology favors smaller, faster, and less predictable systems.

It is possible that carriers will evolve rather than disappear. Future designs may emphasize smaller carriers, drone integration, and enhanced missile defenses. Yet unless these adaptations succeed, supercarriers risk drifting toward obsolescence, expensive relics of a bygone era.

Supercarriers still occupy an outsized role in global naval power, commanding prestige, fear, and respect. But their vulnerabilities are real and growing. From simulated attacks

that expose their defenses to the proliferation of hypersonic missiles capable of striking from beyond the horizon, the very logic of investing in multi-billion-dollar platforms is under scrutiny.

For nations like the United States and India, the question is no longer whether carriers can project power—they can—but whether the costs and risks outweigh the benefits in a rapidly changing strategic environment. In contrast, states investing in denial capabilities may find themselves holding the advantage, able to neutralize an adversary's crown jewel with far cheaper weapons.

The future of the carrier lies in this delicate balance between tradition and transformation. Whether they endure as central pillars of naval doctrine or fade into obsolescence will depend on how successfully navies adapt them to the demands of modern warfare.

Future of Naval Warfare

How technology is reshaping the seas

For centuries, naval warfare has revolved around large capital ships, battleships, aircraft carriers, destroyers, projecting power across oceans. But in the 21st century, this model is undergoing a dramatic shift. New technologies, asymmetric strategies, and automation are reshaping how wars at sea are fought. Naval warfare is now less about sheer size and more about speed, intelligence, adaptability, and distributed power.

This transformation is being driven by multiple factors, the vulnerability of large, costly vessels to precision-guided weapons, the rise of autonomous systems, and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into naval operations. From unmanned swarms to dynamic minefields, the maritime battlespace is entering a new era.

The Rise of Small, Fast, and Unmanned Platforms

One of the clearest changes is the growing reliance on small, fast, and unmanned platforms. Nations like Iran and North Korea deploy swarms of missile-armed boats as a cost-effective counter to much larger naval adversaries. The idea is simple: dozens of small, maneuverable vessels armed with anti-ship missiles can overwhelm a destroyer's defenses at a fraction of the cost. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are revolutionizing naval strike capabilities. For instance, the U.S. Navy's MQ-25 Stingray provides carrier-based refueling and reconnaissance, while Turkish Bayraktar drones have already demonstrated naval strike capabilities in regional conflicts.

Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) platforms extend surveillance, mine warfare, and anti-submarine patrols into areas too dangerous for crewed submarines. Russia's Poseidon UUV, a nuclear-powered unmanned submarine capable of carrying a massive warhead, represents a futuristic form of deterrence. Ukraine's use of naval drones to strike Russian ships in the Black Sea shows how small unmanned systems can punch far

above their weight. This marks a move toward distributed lethality, where combat power is spread across many smaller platforms instead of concentrated in a few vulnerable ships.

AI Integration, Smarter, Faster Decision-Making

Artificial intelligence is increasingly at the heart of naval modernization. AI-enabled radars and sonar systems can instantly detect, classify, and prioritize multiple threats in contested environments, reducing the burden on human operators.

AI makes it possible for Autonomous Swarms of unmanned boats, aerial drones, and underwater vehicles to operate as a coordinated “hive.” These swarms can overwhelm defenses, conduct ISR, or deploy mines with minimal human oversight. AI can fuse satellite data, drone feeds, sonar readings, and electronic intelligence into a coherent tactical picture, giving commanders near-instant situational awareness. In the Strait of Hormuz, Iran demonstrates how swarms of fast attack boats can threaten U.S. carriers.

Dynamic Minefields and Smart Underwater Weapons

Mine warfare is undergoing its own revolution. Unlike traditional mines, modern versions are networked, programmable, and able to distinguish between friend and foe. They can even relocate themselves on the seabed to create dynamic minefields that adapt to enemy movements.

Unmanned vehicles can lay or neutralize mines covertly, extending operational reach. These can also use for mine clearance and defusing. Future torpedoes are expected to incorporate AI-guided navigation, making them capable of hunting submarines autonomously in complex underwater terrains. These advances make sea denial far more flexible and unpredictable, complicating any adversary’s attempt to secure maritime dominance.

Cyber and Electronic Warfare at Sea

Naval battles are no longer fought solely with steel and firepower—they are increasingly fought in the electromagnetic spectrum. Jamming, spoofing, and disabling adversary radars, GPS systems, and communications can blind an opponent's fleet without firing a shot. The 2014 incident where the USS Donald Cook reportedly experienced electronic disruption in the Black Sea (though disputed) highlights these vulnerabilities.

Ships today are floating data centers. Hackers targeting a warship's software, navigation system, or weapon controls can cripple it remotely. Both China and Russia have demonstrated capabilities in maritime Cyber warfare. Future naval supremacy will hinge as much on control of data and networks as on control of physical sea lanes.

Hypersonic Missiles, The Carrier Killers

As of today the most game-changing weapon in modern naval warfare is the hypersonic missile. Traveling at speeds of Mach 5 and above, these weapons can evade traditional air defenses. Russia's Zircon hypersonic missile and China's DF-21D "carrier killer" ballistic missile are designed to neutralize the dominance of U.S. aircraft carriers.

Hypersonic weapons compress decision-making windows to mere seconds, challenging even the most advanced Aegis missile defense systems. A shift away from large, expensive carriers dominating oceans, toward a more contested maritime environment where mobility and dispersion matter most.

Space-Based and Networked Naval Warfare

The seas are now connected to space like never before. Real-time targeting data from satellites enables precision strikes far beyond the horizon. China's Beidou and the U.S. GPS are not just navigation tools, they are warfighting assets.

Future navies will no longer operate as isolated fleets but as interconnected nodes within a global information grid, where ships, drones, submarines, and satellites contribute to a unified tactical picture. Dominance at sea will increasingly hinge on dominance in space, as the loss or jamming of a single satellite could blind entire naval formations. The horizon points to flotillas of autonomous and unmanned vessels patrolling independently, supported by directed-energy weapons such as lasers and railguns that offer near-limitless defensive firepower against swarms and missiles. Stealth reconnaissance may come from biomimetic systems, machines designed to mimic fish or marine mammals, while next-generation submarines navigate without GPS, relying instead on quantum navigation to remain undetectable and resilient in contested waters.

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