

Reconceptualizing India's Security- National, Transnational, and Maritime Dimensions in the 21st Century

Mukund V. Narvenkar*

Assistant Professor, School of International and Area Studies, Goa University, Goa, India

*Corresponding Author Email: mukundnarvenkar@unigoa.ac.in

Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of India's security framework in the 21st century, highlighting its transition from a traditional, land-based, military-centric model to a comprehensive approach that encompasses national, transnational, and maritime security. Originally shaped by partition, regional conflicts, and territorial disagreements with Pakistan and China, India's security focus was mainly state-centric. However, globalization, technological advances, and emerging threats have expanded this perspective, prompting India to rethink security beyond mere territorial defense. During the early nation-building phase, threats primarily came from Pakistan and China from a national security perspective. Later, India faces interconnected transnational threats such as terrorism, cybercrime, illicit trafficking, climate change, and regional instability. Its strategic responses include increased multilateral cooperation, intelligence sharing, and flexible security partnerships with like-minded nations. Maritime security became a key aspect after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, due to India's long coastline, reliance on Sea Lanes of Communication, and growing geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean Region. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how India's security architecture has evolved and been redefined from a primarily national focus to a broader, transnational, and maritime perspective. It investigates the factors influencing India's strategic development and concludes by offering a nuanced understanding of how India navigates the complex security landscape of the 21st century.*

Keywords: India, National, Transnational, Maritime, Security

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, India's security paradigm has experienced a significant shift, driven by the convergence of traditional threats, emerging transnational issues, and the strategic importance of maritime power. As a growing regional power and an aspiring global actor, India's redefinition of security reflects its changing geopolitical posture and the complex interaction of domestic vulnerabilities, regional factors, and global developments. This redefinition is not just a reaction to external pressures but a purposeful recalibration of strategic goals, institutional structures, and shared understandings of what defines national security.

Historically, India's security focus prioritized conventional military threats, mainly from its nearby neighbors. The legacy of partition, ongoing tensions with Pakistan, and unresolved border issues with China fostered a land- and state-centric security outlook. However, after the Cold War, along with globalization, technological advances, and economic liberalization, the understanding of security has broadened beyond mere territory protection. India is now faced with a range of international challenges such as terrorism, cyberattacks, pandemics, climate change, energy concerns, and illegal trafficking. Addressing these transnational issues requires cooperative efforts, multidimensional policies, and a rethinking of sovereignty in an interconnected world.

India's internal security landscape at the national level remains highly complex. Ethno-religious tensions, left-wing extremism, insurgencies in the Northeast, and communal violence continue to challenge democratic institutions and the state's capacity. The securitisation of identity, politicisation of law enforcement, and uneven regional development have added to these difficulties. To address these issues, India has implemented legislative reforms, adopted new technologies, and improved inter-agency coordination. Nonetheless, the tension between protecting civil liberties and maintaining state authority persists, raising important questions about the nature of security in a democratic society.

Transnationally, India's security strategy is increasingly influenced by its involvement with global governance regimes, strategic partnerships, and Nations, (1986) defines security as freedom from military, political, and economic coercion; however, this view is limited in complex contexts, such as India, where persistent geopolitical tensions persist.

Maritime security has become a crucial component of India's revised security strategy. With a coastline

stretching over 11,098.81 kilometers, a large exclusive economic zone, and vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), India's maritime area is crucial to its economy and strategic clout. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), traditionally seen as India's natural zone of influence, is now highly contested due to great power rivalry, piracy, illegal fishing, and environmental issues. India's maritime strategy, outlined in doctrines like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), combines hard power, cooperative security efforts, and regional capacity-building. The Indian Navy's expansion, new strategic ports, and maritime partnerships with neighboring states demonstrate India's goal to serve as a regional security provider.

This reconceptualization is also epistemological, as it questions the traditional divide between internal and external security, military and non-military threats, and state and human security. India's strategic community, which has traditionally been dominated by realist and statist views, is progressively adopting interdisciplinary approaches that include environmental, technological, and societal factors. The integration of climate resilience, cyber governance, and health security into national security strategies reflects a broader view of vulnerability and resilience. Additionally, the discussion on Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) in defence production and strategic technologies underscores the links between economic policy and national security.

India's revamped security framework is a complex and layered system. It is influenced by historical legacies, current needs, and ambitions for global leadership. The framework shows a move from reactive defense to actively shaping the strategic environment, from focusing on territories to adopting domain-based strategies, and from unilateral actions to multilateral cooperation. Thus, this research paper aims to explore the evolution of India's security architecture from a primarily national focus to a broader, transnational, and maritime perspective. It examines the factors driving the development of India's security strategies. In conclusion, it seeks to contribute to India's nuanced understanding and navigation through the complex landscape of 21st-century security.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of security has evolved significantly, shaped by global politics, societal values, and academic thought. Traditionally, security was state-centric, focused on military power, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, especially during the Cold War (Ursign et al., 2016). The United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs (United Nations, 1986) defines security as freedom from military, political, and economic coercion; however, this view is limited in complex contexts, such as India, where persistent geopolitical tensions persist.

Post-Cold War changes, particularly globalization, prompted scholars like Buzan (1987) to expand the scope of security to include economic, environmental, societal, and political aspects. India's experience with liberalization and globalization exposed it to new security threats—terrorism, cybercrime, and climate change—calling for multi-dimensional frameworks. The human security approach represents a major shift, focusing on protecting people from poverty, inequality, and environmental hazards rather than just safeguarding the state (Ursign et al., 2016;

Hamourtziadou, 2020). This people-centered perspective prioritizes basic rights such as life, healthcare, identity, and dignity over military power.

Critical perspectives challenge traditional views, arguing that security is political, shaped by power dynamics and lived experiences (Bendfeldt et al., 2025). Perhaps security is rooted in mutual trust, shared interests, and attention to societal and environmental concerns, rather than just military power. Therefore, security today is multidimensional, covering military, economic, societal, political, and human aspects, ultimately aiming to allow individuals to live freely and with dignity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in a comprehensive review of secondary sources, policy documents, and open-source intelligence. The analysis draws on official government publications, parliamentary reports, think-tank studies, and academic literature to examine the evolution of India's coastal and maritime security framework following the 26/11 attacks. Sources, including reports from the Ministry of Defence, the Indian Navy, the Indian Coast Guard, and the Ministry of Home Affairs, were analyzed to assess institutional reforms and operational readiness. Scholarly works on national and transnational security were incorporated to conceptualize the multidimensional nature of maritime threats.

RECONCEPTUALIZING SECURITY: NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL, AND MARITIME SECURITY

National Security

National security in modern India is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond traditional notions of defending territory. Influenced by global connections, internal weaknesses, and the need for inclusive development, it necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses military, economic, social, and institutional aspects.

Historically, India's security approach was based on state sovereignty and the legitimate use of force to address internal and external threats. However, globalization has brought about non-traditional and transnational challenges—such as terrorism, cyberattacks, economic disruptions, climate change, and pandemics like COVID-19 that cross national borders and alter security frameworks. As a result, national security today includes protecting sovereignty, stability, and citizen welfare from both traditional and unconventional threats, including great power rivalries and internal insurrections.

India's strategic posture underwent considerable changes during and after the Cold War. The Smiling Buddha (Pokhran I) (Desai & Desai, 2021) marked a key technological achievement in 1974, while 'Operation Shakti' (Desai & Desai, 2021) of the 1998 tests demonstrated political determination, strategic depth, and a clear doctrine. These events prompted a shift in India's security approach, focusing on deterrence and independence. The doctrine of minimal nuclear deterrence, as explained by Kamat (1999), reflects a logical and measured response to regional instability. It highlights civil-military coordination, credible second-strike capability, and diplomatic restraint—balancing

strategic independence with international disarmament goals.

Resilience has become a key element of India's national security. In this context, resilience means the country's ability to withstand shocks and keep essential societal functions running, especially economic stability. This involves protecting against currency fluctuations, capital outflows, and economic pressure in an increasingly connected global economy. Financial stability and risk management are, therefore, crucial to national resilience.

India's national security system is flexible and multifaceted. It includes military readiness, economic strength, infrastructure security, social unity, and the protection of democratic values. These components are managed through strong institutions and strategic planning, allowing the country to effectively address changing threats.

Thus, national security in India today is defined not just by defense capabilities but by the nation's overall ability to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and its citizens' well-being. This comprehensive approach shows a move from reactive defense to proactive resilience, ensuring India stays secure, stable, and strategically independent in a complex global environment.

Transnational Security

Globalization has significantly transformed national security by widening its scope to include transnational threats that transcend national borders. Increased economic interdependence, digital connectivity, and the rapid movement of people and information have created new opportunities for cooperation but also enabled the spread of weapons, narcotics, and extremist ideologies. This shifting landscape compels states to reassess security priorities and adopt strategies that address threats emerging beyond traditional territorial confines.

Transnational security challenges such as terrorism, organized crime, cyber-attacks, and climate-induced migration now require coordinated, multi-actor responses. Events like the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai exposed critical vulnerabilities in national security architectures and demonstrated the capacity of non-state actors to carry out high-impact strikes across jurisdictions. India, situated in a geopolitically sensitive region, faces heightened exposure due to instability in its neighborhood and its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific. Its proximity to South Asia's conflict-prone zones enables cross-border terrorism, insurgency, narcotics trafficking, transnational organized crime, illegal migration, and refugee flows. Environmental degradation and resource scarcity further compound these challenges.

India's extensive coastline, porous borders, and dependence on maritime routes increase its vulnerability to terrorism, human trafficking, arms smuggling, counterfeit currency networks, and piracy. The 26/11 maritime attack highlighted major gaps in coastal surveillance, intelligence-sharing, and maritime preparedness. It also underscored the susceptibility of India's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), which are vital for trade and energy security. In response, maritime security has gained greater prominence in Indian strategic planning, yet the rise of grey-zone activities, transnational crime, and geopolitical competition

in the Indo-Pacific demands deeper integration of national and regional efforts.

To counter these evolving threats, India must enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), invest in modern coastal defense technologies, strengthen inter-agency coordination, and expand engagement with regional frameworks such as the Quad and IORA. Additionally, non-traditional threats, such as cyber warfare, environmental stress, and economic coercion, require security strategies that blend traditional defense with adaptive, anticipatory approaches.

Thus, India must adopt a comprehensive, cooperative, and flexible security framework that balances national sovereignty with regional collaboration. Such an approach is essential for safeguarding India's interests in both continental South Asia and the increasingly strategic maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime Security

The concept of maritime security has significantly evolved from a narrow naval focus to a broader framework encompassing national sovereignty, economic stability, environmental protection, and emerging non-traditional threats. For India, this shift is shaped by its Indo-Pacific location, growing dependence on maritime trade, and critical events such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which exposed major coastal vulnerabilities.

"Maritime" refers to ocean-related activities with natural and political dimensions. The natural maritime environment offers resource-rich opportunities, while the political aspect involves exercising control over maritime zones, particularly the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), essential for sovereignty and resource management (Khurana, 2019). This is vital for India, as 95% of its trade by volume and about 70% by value is transported through the seas (Press Information Bureau, 2025). The protection of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and expansion of the maritime blue economy have thus become central to India's national and economic security.

Coastal security, an integral component of maritime security, safeguards ports, islands, infrastructure, and shoreline populations. India's long coastline of 11,098.81 km, 1,382 islands, and vast fishing and commercial fleets underline this strategic importance (Singh, 2017). The 2008 Mumbai attacks marked a turning point by revealing lapses in surveillance, preparedness, and inter-agency coordination, emphasizing the need for robust coastal defense.

Following the 26/11 attacks, India implemented major reforms, including the Coastal Surveillance Network (CSN) for radar monitoring, the Automatic Identification System (AIS) for tracking vessels, and the National Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (NC3I) system for real-time information sharing. The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) received strengthened legal mandates and became the lead agency for coastal security, working alongside the Navy, marine police, and other stakeholders.

However, challenges persist. Singh (2017) notes ongoing issues like fragmented coordination, overlapping jurisdictions, limited community participation, and insufficient protection of critical coastal infrastructure. To

address this, Khurana (2019) recommends creating a Central Marine Police Force (CMPF) to professionalize coastal law enforcement, enabling the Navy and ICG to focus on broader Indo-Pacific missions.

Emerging threats, including maritime terrorism, piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, refugee flows, and climate-driven migration, cross national boundaries and require integrated technology, regional cooperation, and resilient coastal communities. With rising cyber risks and underwater sabotage, securing naval bases, nuclear facilities, and offshore installations has become vital. Thus, as India strengthens its Indo-Pacific role, a unified, technologically advanced, and well-coordinated maritime and coastal security framework is essential for safeguarding sovereignty, economic interests, and regional stability.

FACTORS DRIVING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIA'S SECURITY STRATEGIES

India's security strategies have significantly evolved in response to the changing geopolitics of the 21st century. This evolving geopolitics is driven by emerging power rivalries, shifting geopolitical realities, and the need to safeguard national interests in a transforming global order. Three main factors have shaped India's security strategies: China's rise, ongoing instability in India's immediate neighborhood, and the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

The rapid rise of China as a political, economic, and military power remains one of the most influential external factors shaping India's security outlook. China's expansionist ambitions, militarisation, and assertiveness—especially along disputed land borders with India—pose strategic concerns. Incidents like Depsang 2013, Chumar 2014, Demchok 2014, Doklam 2017, and Galwan Valley 2020 highlight the volatility of the boundary and China's salami-slicing strategy. Furthermore, China's growing presence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi Jinping's signature project, in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Nepal, is viewed by India as an attempt to leverage the Chinese 'Strings of Pearls' strategy. Additionally, Beijing's overseas naval base at Djibouti raises alarms about India's maritime security and sea lanes of communication. China's expanding naval fleet and its ongoing operations near India's exclusive economic zone in the Indian Ocean further suggest Beijing's strategic intentions. Such behaviour further influences India's national security, as discussed above in the reconceptualisation of security. In this context, enhancing India's deterrence capabilities and developing advanced naval technologies supported by AI-driven maritime security would strengthen its maritime domain awareness.

India's security landscape is also influenced by ongoing instability in its immediate neighborhood. Historically, India's neighbors rarely experienced simultaneous upheaval as they do today, with each country undergoing its own transformation. The socio-political and economic instability in the region remains the world's most fragile area. Deteriorating conditions in Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Pakistan contribute to unrest and often spill over into India's border regions. These conditions also foster transnational crimes such as terrorism, organized crime, cyber-attacks, human trafficking, arms and drug smuggling, counterfeit currency operations,

and maritime piracy. Additionally, Beijing's political, strategic, and economic influence in these countries complicates India's regional environment. In response to South Asia's instability, India has strengthened its intelligence networks, improved border security, deepened defense partnerships with neighbors, and promoted regional integration through people-to-people contact, soft power strategies, and the institutionalization of cooperation and coordination mechanisms to address common threats. From a foreign policy standpoint, initiatives like the Neighbourhood First policy and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) are particularly significant.

Lastly, the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific has sparked widespread debate among strategic thinkers and policymakers, reshaping regional foreign policies. For India, the Indo-Pacific is key to securing strategic sea lanes, energy resources, and broader maritime interests that support regional economic stability. With major global and regional powers active in the area, increasing US-China rivalry further heightens the region's strategic importance. ASEAN, Japan, Australia, and European partners also play vital roles in shaping this landscape. Amid these geostrategic and geoeconomic changes, India's strategic choices are driven by its vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rule-based Indo-Pacific. Initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue demonstrate its commitment to sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution especially in response to unilateral efforts to alter the status quo in contested waters, such as the South China Sea. Strengthened bilateral ties across East and Southeast Asia, along with partnerships such as France's, have broadened India's naval capabilities. Overall, these efforts showcase India's shift from a land-focused actor to a major maritime power.

CONCLUSION

India's 21st-century security framework reflects a shift from traditional military-centric thinking to a more integrated, resilient, and forward-looking strategy. Shaped by historical experiences, transnational threats, and intensifying great-power competition, India now views security through a multidimensional lens that includes society, critical infrastructure, the economy, and maritime spaces. Growing global interconnectedness, economic, technological, and environmental, reinforces the need for a comprehensive approach that extends beyond defending territorial borders.

India balances deterrence with technological modernization, institutional reform, and the protection of democratic values. Strengthening resilience, particularly in economic and infrastructural sectors, shows India's recognition that national power today depends on continuity and societal stability as much as on military strength. India also responds to transnational challenges by prioritizing intelligence sharing, cyber governance, regional cooperation, and multilateral engagement, reflecting the porous and interconnected nature of contemporary threats.

The maritime domain has emerged as the central focus of India's security posture. Post-26/11 reforms, combined with the Indo-Pacific vision and the SAGAR doctrine, signal a decisive shift toward maritime

preparedness, coastal defense, blue-economy security, and environmental stewardship. As great-power rivalry intensifies, India seeks to shape regional norms as a self-assured maritime power. Thus, India's evolving security strategy is adaptive, principled, and strategically independent, aiming not only to safeguard the nation but also to promote a stable and cooperative regional order.

REFERENCES

1. Bendfeldt, L., Clifford. E., Ridden. L., and Hannah. R. (2025). Rethinking 'protection' in international relations: a collection of interventions. *Critical Studies on Security* 13(1): 104-107. DOI: 10.1080/21624887.2024.2418707
2. Buzan, B. (1987). *People State and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Transasia Publishers: New Delhi.
3. Desai, J. B., & Desai, B. H. (2021). On India as a Responsible Nuclear Weapon State: Does the 'No First Use' Doctrine Need a Review? *International Studies*, 58(3), 342-362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002088172111024439>
4. Hamourtziadou, L. (2020). Security challenges of the 21st century: new challenges and perspectives. *Journal of Global Faultlines* 6 (2): 121-123. DOI: 10.13169/jglobfaul.6.2.0121
5. Kamath, P.M. (1999). Indian national security policy: Minimal nuclear deterrence. *Strategic Analysis* 23(8): 1257-1274. DOI: 10.1080/09700169908455122
6. Khurana, G. (2019). India's Evolving Coastal Security Architecture: A Case for a New Central Force. *National Maritime Foundation*. <https://maritimeindia.org/indias-evolving-coastal-security-architecture-a-case-for-a-new-central-force/>
7. Press Information Bureau. (2025, October 26). Maritime India: From Vision 2030 to Amrit Kaal 2047. Press Information Bureau Headquarters. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2182563>
8. Singh, A. 2017. *Coastal Security Paradox*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-coastal-security-paradox>
9. United Nations. 1986. Concept of Security. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/99705?ln=en>
10. Ursign, H., Gianluca. M., Åsa. M., and Pascal. R. 2016. *Linking Mine Action and SSR through Human Security*. Ubiquity Press, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.