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Issue Brief

INMSS-2026: What India's New Maritime Strategy Means

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S*ummary*

INMSS-2026 reflects a progressive maturation in India's public naval strategic thought, marked by greater conceptual refinement, clearer strategic structuring, and closer alignment between doctrine and contemporary operational realities.

The release of the *Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy 2026* (INMSS-2026) marks the third public articulation of India’s naval strategy in less than two decades, following *Freedom to Use the Seas* (2007) and *Ensuring Secure Seas* (2015). These documents are more than declaratory texts. They reveal how the Indian Navy interprets changes in the strategic environment, defines its institutional role, and seeks to align operational priorities with national objectives. Taken together, they trace the evolution of India’s maritime strategic thought.¹

INMSS-2026 also follows closely on the publication of the *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025* (IMD-25), the Navy’s principal doctrinal statement. In our earlier assessment, we argued that IMD-25 represented a significant conceptual advance through its recognition of ‘No War No Peace’ (NWNP) conditions, multi-domain operations, and a growing emphasis on jointness. At the same time, we noted unresolved questions regarding the operational meaning of concepts such as ‘Preferred Security Partner’ and ‘First Responder’, the limited treatment of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, and the translation of doctrine into strategy.² INMSS-2026 can therefore be read, in part, as an institutional effort to address some of these open questions through a more explicit strategic framework.

This brief argues that INMSS-2026 reflects a progressive maturation in India’s public naval strategic thought, marked by greater conceptual refinement, clearer strategic structuring, and closer alignment between doctrine and contemporary operational realities. It advances beyond earlier editions by incorporating a clearer Ends–Ways–Means–Risks framework, recognising persistent competition below the threshold of open conflict, and adopting a more pragmatic language of regional partnership. Yet the strategy also exposes a familiar tension between widening maritime interests and finite capabilities. Its significance lies not only in doctrinal innovation but in what it reveals about India’s continuing effort to scale maritime power without strategic overreach.³

The Evolution of India’s Maritime Strategy, 2007–2026

India’s three public maritime strategy documents, issued in 2007, 2015 and 2026, trace a clear evolution in naval strategic thinking. Read together, they show a shift

¹ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)](#)”, Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication, April 2026, p. 101; “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#)”, Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication, October 2015, pp. 1–13.

² Abhay Kumar Singh and R. Vignesh, “[Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025: An Assessment](#)”, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 9 March 2026.

³ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)](#)”, no. 1, pp. 96–123.

from securing access to the seas to managing a broader maritime security agenda, and finally to operating in an environment defined by persistent competition and strategic uncertainty. Each document reflected the pressures of its time while also seeking to shape institutional priorities for the decade ahead.

Freedom to Use the Seas (2007) emerged amid sustained economic growth, expanding external trade, and growing confidence in India’s long-term rise. Its central proposition was that maritime power was indispensable to national development and strategic autonomy. The document defined India’s maritime military strategy around three broad tasks: force employment in peace, force employment in crisis or conflict, and force build-up. It also adopted an overtly oceanic rather than coastal orientation, emphasising sea control, deterrence, forward presence, and the ability to influence events ashore. The underlying challenge was to secure greater strategic attention for the maritime domain within a national security system still largely shaped by continental priorities.⁴

By 2015, the strategic context had changed significantly. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks had expanded the Navy’s mandate to encompass overall maritime security, including coastal and offshore responsibilities. Simultaneously, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic construct, increased Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean Region, and India’s regional diplomatic activism broadened expectations of naval roles. In response, *Ensuring Secure Seas* shifted from a narrowly maritime-military framework to a broader conception of maritime security. It articulated five constituent strategies covering deterrence, conflict, a favourable maritime environment, coastal and offshore security, and force development. The document also formally expressed India’s aspiration to act as a ‘net security provider’ in its maritime neighbourhood.⁵

INMSS-2026 reflects a further shift in context. The maritime environment is now shaped by sharper great-power rivalry, growing collusive alignments among adversarial states, recurrent supply-chain and energy vulnerabilities, and increasingly blurred boundaries between peace and conflict. The strategy’s emphasis on NWNP conditions, risk management and adaptive frameworks suggests a navy preparing not only for war or deterrence but also for sustained competition below the threshold of formal hostilities. In this sense, the trajectory from 2007 to 2026 is one from access to security to competition management.⁶

⁴ *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), May 2007, pp. 3, 9–13, 115–129.

⁵ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#)”, no. 1, pp. 2–14, 46–148.

⁶ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)](#)”, no. 1, pp. 96–123.

Doctrinal Innovation and Continuity in INMSS-2026

The most significant contribution of INMSS-2026 lies not in a wholesale break from earlier strategy documents, but in the clearer articulation and operational translation of concepts that had previously appeared in partial, declaratory or doctrinal form. The 2007 and 2015 strategies reflected the demands of their respective moments, while *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025* (IMD-25) refreshed the Navy’s conceptual vocabulary for a more contested era. INMSS-2026 builds on that foundation by linking doctrine more explicitly to strategic objectives, instruments and constraints. Structured around Ends, Threats, Means, Ways and Risks, it adopts a more coherent strategic grammar than its predecessors. The inclusion of a dedicated chapter on ‘Enablers’ and a concluding section on risk management is especially notable, as it acknowledges that strategic intent must be measured against organisational capacity, resources and operational uncertainty.⁷

Another important development is the formal operationalisation of competition below the threshold of open conflict. IMD-25 had recognised NWNP conditions as an increasingly salient feature of the contemporary security environment, but left open how such conditions would shape force employment and strategic planning. INMSS-2026 addresses that gap through a distinct strategy to ‘prevail in situations below the threshold of conflict’. This suggests an institutional recognition that coercion may now take incremental, deniable, episodic, or proxy forms rather than relying solely on conventional military confrontation. Its emphasis on sustained situational awareness, scalable capabilities, multi-stakeholder coordination, and readiness for swift response reflects a more continuous understanding of strategic competition.⁸

Sub-conventional deterrence is added as a third tier alongside nuclear and conventional deterrence. INMSS-2026 adds dedicated coverage of reprisal capacities against non-state actors and their state sponsors.⁹ The document goes further, stating explicitly that ‘India does not consider nuclear positioning as constraining its response options against acts of terrorism’.¹⁰ No predecessor document had stated this explicitly. The statement is the most forthright public articulation of this position in the three-document lineage, and its implications for South Asian strategic stability extend well beyond naval doctrine.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 118–123; “[Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025](#)”, Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication 1.1, 2 December 2025.

⁸ “[Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025](#)”, no. 7, p. ii; “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)](#)”, no. 1, pp. 96–103.

⁹ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)](#)”, no. 1, p. 93.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

The strategy refines India’s regional security vocabulary and gives greater practical meaning to concepts that appeared underdeveloped in IMD-25. The 2015 strategy prominently used the term ‘net security provider’, while IMD-25 introduced formulations such as ‘Preferred Security Partner’ and ‘First Responder’ without fully elaborating their operational content. INMSS-2026 advances these ideas by embedding them within specific sub-strategies centred on cooperative security initiatives, capacity building, rapid assistance and operational support in times of need. The shift from ‘provider’ to ‘partner’ is subtle but meaningful: it places greater emphasis on consent, trust and responsiveness rather than hierarchical provision. In diplomatic terms, this language is better aligned with contemporary regional sensitivities and India’s preference for consultative leadership.¹¹

The strategy also appears to strengthen the link between doctrinal slogans and broader political frameworks. Earlier concerns about the limited treatment of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR are partly addressed by incorporating maritime cooperation, governance, outreach and responder roles into the wider strategy to shape a favourable maritime environment. While these frameworks remain politically framed rather than operational doctrines in themselves, INMSS-2026 gives them clearer strategic expression than before.¹²

Further, while the 2015 strategy anticipated the advent of technological disruption driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), the INMSS-2026 document establishes a framework for the systematic incorporation of emerging technologies into the Indian Navy’s strategic thinking.¹³ It emphasises investment in emerging technologies such as autonomous systems and AI-enabled platforms, alongside traditional platforms, to achieve technological and operational superiority. It also acknowledges the ongoing and accelerating technologies disruption driven by AI, autonomous systems and robotics, which may limit the effectiveness of several operational concepts and tactics even within the timeframe of this document.¹⁴ To ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of this strategy, INMSS-2026 underscores the importance of periodic strategic reviews and continuous horizon scanning to enable the regular refinement of operational and tactical concepts.¹⁵

¹¹ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”](#), no. 1, p. 81; [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, pp. 58–63; Abhay Kumar Singh and R. Vignesh, [“Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025: An Assessment”](#), no. 2.

¹² [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, pp. 54–69; Abhay Kumar Singh and R. Vignesh, [“Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025: An Assessment”](#), no. 2.

¹³ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, p. 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Finally, INMSS-2026 accords unusual prominence to the Indian Navy’s institutional identity by describing it as the ‘primary instrument and principal manifestation of India’s maritime power’. Earlier documents used related formulations, but the combined phrasing is more deliberate and appears intended to reaffirm naval centrality amid expanding jointness, theatre command debates and multi-domain integration. The formulation, therefore, carries both strategic and bureaucratic significance: it defines the Navy’s external role while signalling its claim to remain the lead instrument in maritime operations.¹⁶

Taken together, these changes indicate not a doctrinal rupture, but a progressive refinement of Indian naval strategy towards a more contested, resource-conscious and politically complex maritime environment.

Expanding Reach, Finite Means

A recurring theme across India’s three public maritime strategy documents is the steady expansion of geographic interest. What distinguishes INMSS-2026, however, is not merely the widening of maritime horizons but a more candid attempt to reconcile strategic ambition with finite means. Earlier documents tended either to prioritise selected theatres or to broaden areas of concern without fully addressing the practical implications of reach, presence and command responsibility. INMSS-2026 addresses this tension more explicitly.

In *Freedom to Use the Seas* (2007), India’s maritime geography was viewed primarily through an Indian Ocean lens. The strategy emphasised the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, critical chokepoints, island territories, and selected extra-regional spaces linked to trade, energy, or contingency operations. Its orientation was outward-looking, yet still anchored in a hierarchy of focused interests shaped by available capabilities.¹⁷ The 2015 strategy further widened this outlook by incorporating a broader Indo-Pacific vocabulary and acknowledging growing Indian interests extending from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. Yet the expansion remained largely framed by aspiration and growing interaction rather than by an explicit theory of prioritisation.¹⁸

INMSS-2026 completes this conceptual widening. It defines the secondary area of maritime interest as the broader global maritime domain beyond the primary area,

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 2–3; *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, no. 4, pp. iv–v.

¹⁷ *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, no. 4, pp. 57–60.

¹⁸ “[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#)”, no. 1, pp. 16–32.

recognising that India’s interests now extend across trade routes, diaspora networks, energy flows, connectivity initiatives, and wider political commitments. This language recognises that a rising trading power cannot confine its maritime concerns to immediate littoral waters. At the same time, the strategy stops short of implying universal operational reach.¹⁹

Its most important innovation, therefore, is the distinction between Area of Maritime Interest (AoI) and Area of Responsibility (AoR). The former denotes areas where developments may affect Indian interests; the latter refers to zones where designated commanders have authority to plan and conduct operations. This distinction is analytically significant. It separates awareness from control and interest from assured capability. In practical terms, it allows the Navy to justify broad surveillance, partnership-building and contingency planning across a wide geographical area while acknowledging that sustained operational response must remain selective and prioritised.²⁰

The conceptual widening has not been limited to the geographical dimension; it also extends to the scope and understanding of operational terminology, such as Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). While the 2015 strategy placed considerable emphasis on enhancing MDA capabilities, INMSS-2026 broadens the scope of this concept to align with emerging operational and constabulary challenges in the high seas. Related concepts, including Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA), Seabed Domain Awareness and space/near-space Domain Awareness, have been incorporated into the broader MDA Framework.²¹

While this evolution is consistent with the Indian Navy’s operational priorities, its incorporation into the strategy reflects an acknowledgement of the growing complexity of the contemporary maritime environment. Further, the strategy elucidates a holistic approach to capability-building in this domain by not restricting itself solely to developing national capabilities, but also by emphasising the strengthening of the global maritime governance framework. This has been clearly articulated in INMSS-2026 through the Indian Navy’s structured approach to MDA, encompassing Operational MDA, National MDA, Regional MDA and International frameworks.²²

¹⁹ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, pp. 27–29.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 27–28.

²¹ Ibid., p. 39.

²² Ibid., pp. 39–40.

The distinction also has institutional relevance in the context of prospective theatre commands and wider joint reforms. By recognising that command responsibilities may not automatically map onto the full spectrum of maritime interests, INMSS-2026 appears to anticipate a more distributed future command architecture. Simultaneously, by reaffirming the Navy as the principal maritime instrument, the document suggests that maritime operations should remain professionally led by naval expertise even within joint structures.²³

Yet the underlying tension remains unresolved. Expanding interests generate persistent demands for presence, escort, surveillance, logistics, humanitarian response and deterrence across multiple theatres. These commitments require platforms, infrastructure, trained manpower and budgetary continuity. Strategy can refine priorities, but it cannot eliminate resource constraints. INMSS-2026 is therefore notable less for claiming unlimited reach than for recognising, more openly than its predecessors, that maritime ambition must be managed through calibrated selectivity.

Implementation Prospects and Risks

INMSS-2026 enters implementation with certain advantages that earlier strategy documents lacked. It follows closely after the publication of the *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025*, thereby reducing the conceptual lag that often separates doctrine from strategy in previous cycles. The new strategy also benefits from an Indian Navy that has accumulated substantial operational experience across a wide range of missions, including mission-based deployments, anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, non-combatant evacuation operations, and sustained maritime partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region. In addition, maritime issues now occupy a more prominent place in India’s broader strategic discourse than in earlier decades, aided by growing trade dependence, connectivity initiatives and repeated disruptions to global supply chains. These developments provide a stronger political and institutional context for implementation than was available to either the 2007 or 2015 strategies.²⁴

At the same time, INMSS-2026 is arguably the most demanding of the three documents to implement. Its ambitions span deterrence, grey-zone competition, coastal security, regional partnership, conflict operations, logistics resilience, technological adaptation and global situational awareness. This broad gamut of

²³ Ibid., pp. ii, 2–3, 48–51.

²⁴ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, pp. 54–69; [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”](#), no. 1, pp. 78–148.

priority areas reflects recognition of the complex maritime threats that have emerged in recent years. For instance, the growing threat to Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI) due to grey-zone warfare has been highlighted in the strategy.²⁵

As noted earlier, the strategy’s emphasis on concepts such as UDA and seabed domain awareness stems from this concern. Furthermore, INMSS-2026 notably reorients its approach towards warfighting through a whole-of-nation approach. The strategy explicitly indicates that the Indian Navy fully recognises that success in warfighting can no longer rely solely on military operations.²⁶ It emphasises that success in warfighting can only be achieved through comprehensive synergy encompassing diplomatic initiatives, economic instruments, national defence industrial capacity, cyber defence capabilities, multi-agency intelligence frameworks and inter-ministerial coordination.²⁷

Delivering across this spectrum requires not only platforms and infrastructure but also specialist personnel, digital networks, intelligence integration and sustained maintenance capacity. The strategy itself acknowledges shortfalls in planned force levels and capability requirements, as well as shortages in specialist domains such as cyber, space and artificial intelligence. This candour is notable, but it also underscores the scale of the implementation challenge.²⁸

A second uncertainty concerns the evolving architecture of jointness and theatre reform. INMSS-2026 explicitly notes that impending theaterisation may affect the strategy’s tenure and require adaptation. While greater integration could improve resource efficiency and joint warfighting, transitional uncertainty over command relationships, prioritisation, and service roles may complicate near-term implementation.²⁹

Finally, India’s enduring continental commitments remain relevant. Maritime prioritisation has increased, but defence resources continue to be shared across multiple theatres and contingencies. The central challenge, therefore, is not conceptual coherence but sustained execution. INMSS-2026 provides a more refined framework than its predecessors; whether it succeeds will depend on the extent to which resources, institutions and political attention keep pace with strategic ambition.

²⁵ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, p. 22.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ [“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy \(INMSS-2026\)”](#), no. 1, pp. 34–51, 118–123.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

Conclusion

INMSS-2026 should be read less as a dramatic doctrinal break and more as evidence of a maturing strategic realism in Indian maritime thinking. Unlike earlier strategy documents, which were shaped primarily by the need to assert maritime relevance or to widen the Navy’s security role, the 2026 strategy is more attentive to persistent competition, implementation risk, and the gap between expanding interests and available means. In that respect, it reflects a Navy increasingly concerned not only with what maritime power can achieve but also with how it can be sustained.³⁰

The document’s importance also lies in the closer relationship it establishes between doctrine and strategy. Concepts that appeared in embryonic form in the *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025*—particularly ‘No War No Peace’ conditions, partnership-based security roles and integrated multi-domain operations—are given clearer strategic expression here. This suggests a more iterative and self-correcting process of doctrinal development than in earlier cycles.³¹

The larger challenge, however, remains unchanged. India’s maritime profile is rising faster than its capacity to meet the obligations that accompany it. Yet INMSS-2026 enters implementation with advantages its predecessors did not fully possess: a more integrated doctrinal foundation, greater operational experience, wider strategic recognition of maritime priorities, and a clearer appreciation of risk.

If earlier strategies were often judged by what they promised, INMSS-2026 is more likely to be judged by how effectively it prioritises under constraint. Its enduring value may lie in helping India convert a selective maritime advantage into sustainable strategic influence, with greater discipline and confidence.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 118–123.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 48–51, 96–103; Abhay Kumar Singh and R. Vignesh, “[Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025: An Assessment](#)”, no. 2.

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