

*The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

No. 013/2025 dated 18 February 2025

## India's Expanding Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific

Nishant Rajeev

### SYNOPSIS

*From the late 2010s, the Indian Navy has adopted an assertive and proactive posture in the maritime domain. It has steadily expanded its engagement with the South China Sea's littoral states. India realises that, while its options on the continental frontier are limited, the maritime domain provides India opportunities to apply pressure on China.*

### COMMENTARY

During the Ladakh standoff between India and China in 2020, the Indian Army and Air Force repositioned rapidly to meet the threat from China along their disputed border. The Indian Army "rebalanced" several formations from the western theatre to the eastern theatre to bolster its forces against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Similarly, the Indian Air Force activated several forward operating bases to increase its presence in the eastern theatre. While these strategic measures garnered tremendous coverage in both the local and international media, India's actions in the maritime frontier were somewhat overlooked.

The Indian Navy was active throughout the standoff to challenge and pressure China in the Indian Ocean Region. It [stepped](#) up deployments of its warships and submarines especially around the strategic Strait of Malacca. It carried out [exercises](#) with the US Navy and Japanese Navy shortly after the Galwan Valley clashes in June 2020.

These measures highlight India's growing recognition of the importance of the maritime theatre in the India-China competition. Apart from bolstering bilateral relations with other regional maritime partners, India has recognised that the maritime domain provides scope to expand its options against China. India is slowly shedding its traditional reticence and adopting a more proactive approach to the maritime domain, moving even beyond the Indian Ocean region.

## The Indian Navy's Engagement Beyond the Indian Ocean

The Indian Navy's doctrines have long recognised the importance of the maritime domain for India's economic progress. The first maritime strategy document was promulgated at a time when Indian policymakers were articulating the conception of India's extended neighbourhood. Despite this, India remained cautious in engaging the South China Sea's littoral states or even operating in the wider region. The Indian Navy did frequently deploy to the South China Sea region and then on to the North-Western Pacific Ocean. Such deployments took place at least once a year. It has also had a long history of conducting Coordinated Patrols with Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar in and around the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea. It conducted an annual exercise, Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), with the Republic of Singapore Navy as well.

However, much of its naval diplomacy with the South China Sea's littoral states was limited to port calls. In the early 2010s, India refrained from conducting exercises in the South China Sea. When exercises did occur, they were usually in the form of multilateral naval exercises.

This position began to gradually change in the mid- to late-2010s. In 2017, the Indian Navy launched its Mission Based Deployments operational posture. The posture [called](#) for the navy to increase "its presence and visibility" across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian Navy's ships, aircraft, and submarines have [since](#) been deploying to critical choke points around the IOR and [maintained](#) a presence at all the "ingress and egress routes of the IOR".

The Indian Navy's engagement with the littoral states of the South China Sea has also undergone an evolution. It [began](#) exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea in 2018. Such exercises have taken place at regular intervals in [2019](#), [2021](#), [2023](#), and [2024](#). In 2020, the Indian Navy provided relief materials to Vietnam after the country was affected by floods. While [departing](#) the country, the Indian naval vessel, INS Kiltan also conducted a "passage exercise" in the South China Sea. More recently, the Indian Navy has begun exercising with the Philippine Navy in the West Philippine Sea. Although the exact details of the exercise are scarce, the first [known](#) exercise was conducted in 2021. Two more iterations of these "Maritime Partnership Exercises" have been conducted since then in the same region in [2023](#) and [2024](#). With Malaysia, the Indian Navy has conducted three iterations of the "Samudra Laksamana" exercise series in 2019, 2022, and 2024. While the 2024 edition was [conducted](#) off the Indian Eastern Seaboard, the first two editions were [held](#) in the vicinity of the South China Sea near the Malaysian port of Kota Kinabalu.

Apart from this bilateral engagement, India has also begun engaging extra-regional powers in and around the South China Sea region, namely its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners. The Malabar exercises between the Quad navies were conducted in the Philippine Sea in 2016, 2018, and in 2022 (after the inclusion of Australia). Previously, the Indian Navy [joined](#) the US Navy, the Japanese Navy, and the Philippine Navy in conducting a "group sail" exercise in the South China Sea in May 2019. Later that year, the US Navy replenishment ship conducted an [at-sea replenishment](#) of an Indian anti-submarine warfare corvette INS Kiltan in the waters of the South China Sea.



India joined its Quad partners — Japan, Australia, and the United States — for the 26th iteration of the Malabar naval exercises in 2022. *Source: Indian Navy, [GODL-India](#), via Wikimedia Commons.*

## The China Factor in India's Engagement

The recent activities the Indian Navy is undertaking highlight its shifting position over the years. The Indian Navy has adopted a much more assertive position in the region, partly driven by its own rise and expanding national interests, but also with an eye on China.

On the continental frontier, India is constrained. The material balance of power has shifted in the PLA's favour as three decades of strong economic growth have fuelled its military rise. Any escalatory moves along the disputed Line of Actual Control can spark a military conflict. However, the naval domain provides India opportunities. It not only retains an advantage in the IOR but can also partner with a long list of states apprehensive of China's behaviour.

An Indian presence in the South China Sea further challenges Chinese attempts to dominate the region, at least normatively, if not materially. Other regional powers like the United States and Australia are already engaged in such activities, and a coordinated Indian presence can augment such efforts. Ultimately, it complicates China's ability to act freely in the region and hands India an avenue to apply pressure on China.

This position also adds credibility to India's increasing readiness to confront China and potentially play a role in a regional conflict. The message from India is that it is prepared to contribute to a deterrence effort to prevent China's military dominance of the region. While India is unlikely to engage militarily, it can assist in other ways. A former Indian Naval Chief has [suggested](#) that India could take over some of the US Navy's responsibilities in parts of the Indian Ocean Region, provided that both navies develop better interoperability. This would allow the United States to commit its forces in a theatre of conflict. It can also provide logistics support and conduct escort operations for US naval vessels in the Indian Ocean Region.

None of this suggests that the Indian Navy can readily challenge the PLA in the South China Sea. Given the pace of Chinese naval development, the Indian Navy has a daunting task of maintaining its superiority in the IOR itself. However, the Indian Navy's increasing presence in the South China Sea gives India more leverage as it confronts China across the Indo-Pacific.

***Nishant Rajeev*** is a Senior Analyst with the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

---

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798