

India-China Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean

By Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury

The last few months has seen India strengthen its position vis-à-vis China in their maritime competition in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi has bolstered infrastructure development in the region, increased military partnerships with like-minded nations in Southeast Asia and hosted its biennial flagship naval exercise, Milan 2024. These developments reflect India's intent to augment its regional capabilities and position itself as the linchpin to maintaining freedom of navigation and security in the Indian Ocean. Challenges, however, remain for India as China's successful overtures in South Asia and expanding Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean continue to be of concern.

Infrastructure

On March 6, 2024, the Indian Navy **commissioned** a new naval base, the INS Jatayu, in the strategically located Lakshadweep archipelago off the country's south-western coast. Situated on Minicoy, the southernmost island of Lakshadweep, it was formerly a temporary establishment before it was converted into a full-fledged base. Assets and personnel will also be permanently based on Minicoy which was not the case earlier.

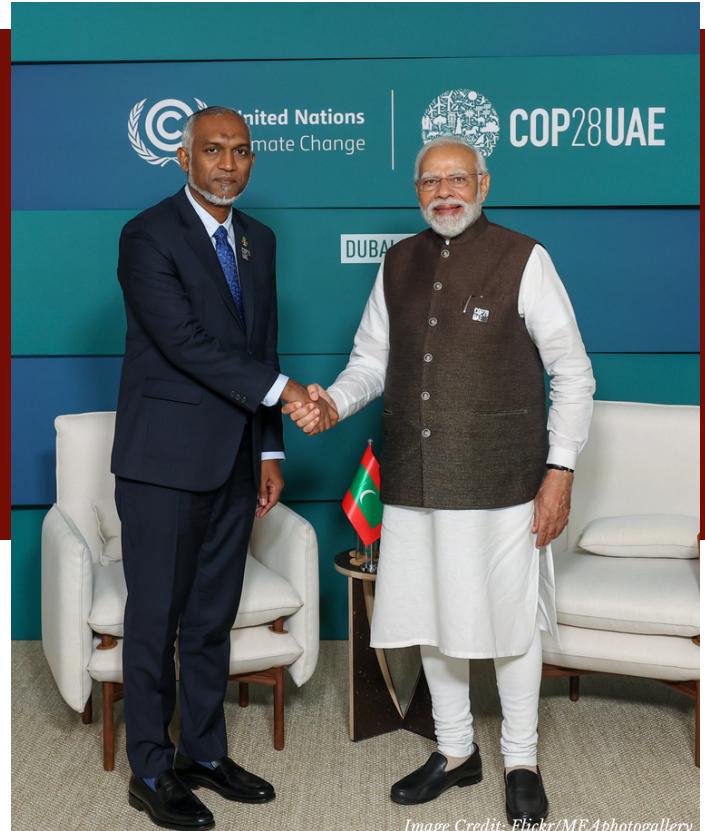


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This will be the second naval base in Lakshadweep after INS Dweeprakshak on Kavaratti island further north.

The establishment of INS Jatayu will further India's maritime interests and extend the Indian Navy's operational reach in the Indian Ocean and Western Arabian Sea. The Lakshadweep islands lie around 180 km north of the Maldives, and together with the Andaman islands off the country's eastern shore, play an important role in maritime security, surveillance and intelligence collection, and power projection capabilities. An **official statement** said the base would facilitate anti-piracy and anti-narcotics operations as well as "augment [the] Indian Navy's capability as a first responder in the region." The statement reflects not just India's confidence in its growing capabilities, but also its willingness to assume the role of a leading power in the Indian Ocean.

In its competition with China, several **actions** taken by New Delhi have reinforced its image as a first responder, as well as a key regional and security player. This includes measures taken amidst the tensions in West Asia, such as deploying Indian warships to the Arabian Sea to conduct anti-piracy patrols and also providing assistance to ships struck by Houthi drones and missiles. The timing of this announcement is also important given deteriorating relations between New Delhi and Malé. India is **replacing** its military personnel present in the Maldives with civilian technical staff under a directive from the new Maldivian leader, President Mohamed Muizzu, who had campaigned on an anti-India platform. At the same time, the Maldives **signed** a defence pact with China on March 4, 2024, further fuelling Indian concerns over growing Chinese influence over its archipelagic neighbour.

A week earlier, on February 29, 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Mauritian counterpart, Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, remotely inaugurated an airstrip and a jetty built with Indian assistance on Agaléga island in Mauritius on the western end of the Indian Ocean. The island, with an area of just 25 sq km, is strategically located between Mauritius and Seychelles and to the northeast of Madagascar. As the Indian Ocean is increasingly viewed as a strategic zone, the importance of its small-island nations has increased manifold.

Although India has historical links with the Western Indian Ocean, China's **increasing** presence has led to an Indian refocus towards the region.

India began constructing the facilities in 2015 to help Mauritius **enhance** its maritime security capabilities and was **suspected** of building a naval base on the island. During the inauguration, Jugnauth condemned allegations of relinquishing sovereignty to allow an Indian naval base on the island. Nevertheless, given the closer security relations between the two countries, the establishment of these facilities on Agaléga will play a role in furthering the Indian Navy's operational capacity. India could also deploy its own naval assets to monitor Chinese vessels and seek to balance the increasing Chinese naval presence in the region. Overall, it will **increase** India's ability to deploy to and sustain a presence across the vast Indian Ocean.

Partnerships

The second set of developments India has undertaken in the recent past has been a renewed interest in military engagements with countries in Southeast Asia which lie at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region. Relations between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were **elevated** to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2022. And in May 2023, the inaugural multilateral ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) was held in the South China Sea (SCS)—an important step in India's security engagement with Southeast Asia.

Previously, the only multilateral exercise that India conducted with regional members was the Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX), though it did hold regular bilateral exercises with some individual states. Between 2021 and 2023, India was the **fourth most frequent partner** for joint military exercises with Southeast Asian states after the US, Japan, and Australia.

India, along with ASEAN countries, have shared concerns about China's aggressive actions—along the Himalayan border and grey zone activities in the SCS—which have driven them closer together. Five of these nations—Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam—share overlapping claims and maritime territorial disputes with China.

With ASEAN being a crucial partner in India's Act East and Indo-Pacific policies, New Delhi has focused on expanding its strategic engagement in Southeast Asia led by an increased naval presence in the region. The Chinese reaction to the exercise was also noteworthy. According to **reports**, Chinese maritime militia boats and a research vessel “moved towards” the exercising navies in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. Since AIME 2023, India has continued to conduct maritime exercises and deploy its navy to the region. A few months earlier in February 2023, an Indian Kilo-class conventional submarine made a first-ever port call to Indonesia, highlighting the reach of Indian naval assets and the extent to which defence relations have expanded.

Amongst several other developments on the broader maritime front, India **announced** in June 2023 that it would give a naval warship to Vietnam, for the first time explicitly **called** for adherence to the 2016 arbitration award that had struck down China's territorial claims in South China Sea, and **established** the post of a Defence Attaché in Manila. Ultimately, China's aggressive posturing has led to an increasing convergence of interests between India and ASEAN members that is strengthening New Delhi's position in the region.

Exercise Milan 2024

The third element that has augmented Indian capabilities in the Indian Ocean and projected an image of the country as being central to security in the Indian Ocean is the Indian Navy's Milan 2024 multilateral exercise that is held every two years. Held in Visakhapatnam in February 2024 in its largest iteration, it included participation from more than fifty countries that included Indian Ocean states, the Quad, ASEAN member states, European nations as well as African states. It was **aimed** at allowing the military personnel of the countries involved to gain experience in large force operations at sea, as well as furthering military-to-military relations. The exercise included large force manoeuvres, advanced air defence operations, anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare operation, and tactical manoeuvres off India's eastern coast.

The Milan exercise, while traditionally being seen as an Indian Ocean littoral naval exercise has broadened its scope with the advent of the Indo-Pacific framework. The rapid expansion of the exercise from thirty-nine countries just two years prior in 2022, displays India's convening power and helps cement its profile as a security provider and first responder in the region, able to tackle both traditional and non-traditional threats. More significantly, it indicates India's growing leadership role in the Indian Ocean as the preferred security partner. The exercise also consolidates a multinational force at a time when the safety of sea lines of communications is coming under increasing strain.

Conclusion

As India regards the Indian Ocean as a pivotal arena for both strategic and economic pursuits, its efforts to fortify its position vis-à-vis China in this region have entailed various measures. These include investments in infrastructure projects with potential military utility and heightened diplomatic engagement with ASEAN as a collective entity and its constituent nations driven by shared apprehensions over China's conduct. Additionally, India has underscored its significance in Indian Ocean maritime security by hosting the multinational Milan naval exercise. For New Delhi, these developments contribute to maintaining a secure and stable Indian Ocean. As the country's defence minister

recently **emphasised**, India is dedicated to safeguarding the region against hegemonic economic and military influence, hinting at China's growing military strength. Such developments, therefore, will continue to be an important aspect of India's strategy regarding China.

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