

SOUTH CHINA SEA MONITOR



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THE ISSUE: India's International Fleet Review 2016

With the theme “United through Oceans”, the Indian Navy conducted the 16th International Fleet Review (IFR-16) off Visakhapatnam in the Bay of Bengal from 04 to 08 Feb 2016 - the first one on India's East Coast. The special feature of the Review this year was that it included participation not only by Indian warships but also by those from foreign countries, signifying “[common desire to use the seas to promote peace, cooperation and friendship, as also to develop partnerships for a secure maritime future](#),” said President Pranab Mukherjee as he inspected the naval fleet on February 6.



Source: *The Indian Express*

Delivering his remarks at the fleet review on 7 February, [Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) outlined India's interests on the global seas. “The Indian Ocean Region is one of my foremost policy priorities. Our approach is evident in our vision of ‘Sagar’, which means ‘Ocean’ and stands for – Security And Growth for All in the Region.” He further noted that “[India] would continue to actively pursue and promote [its] geo-political, strategic and economic interests on the seas, in particular the Indian Ocean.”

In all 22 warships from foreign navies were present amongst the 70 warships participated. In addition to the ships, 23 Heads of Navy were also present at Visakhapatnam with another 26 sending a delegation. Altogether IFR 16 saw representation from 50 foreign navies from around the world. The event has yet again brought the focus sharply on the growing debate around the importance of maritime domain in India's overall geopolitical outlook. As the IFR 16 was appreciated, Indian analysts pointed out that it was high time to recognize the naval imperative.

Recent Analyses on the issue:

C Raja Mohan, “[Maritime India versus Continental Delhi](#)”, *The Indian Express*, February 9, 2016.

Rupakjyoti Borah, “[The Indian Navy Charts A New Course With Its 2016 International Fleet Review](#)”, *The Diplomat*, February 16, 2016.

MEDIA WATCH

China ‘seriously concerned’ by Australian defense document concerning South China Sea

Chinese officials say they are “seriously concerned” by an Australian strategic evaluation of the South China Sea and warned Australia against compromising the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Australia announced a 20-year plan 25 February to bolster its naval strength with more submarines and warships as part of a military buildup it said was needed to maintain peace in the region. ([First Post](#))

China’s Foreign Minister Accuses Philippines of ‘Political Provocation’ over Arbitration

China’s foreign minister on 25 February accused the Philippines of “political provocation” by calling for an international arbitration regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the Philippines’ decision of lodging a case with the tribunal in Hague was “irresponsible to the Filipino people and the future of the Philippines.” ([International Business Times](#))

US Presses Xi Jinping On South China Sea Non-Militarization

The White House pressed Chinese President Xi Jinping on 26 February to expand his non-militarization pledge to cover the entire South China Sea, despite Beijing’s recent military activity in the area. During a state visit in September, Xi insisted that “China does not intend to pursue militarization” in the Spratly Island chain -- known as Nansha in Chinese. ([NDTV](#))

China says ‘really needs’ South China Sea defenses in face of United States

China “really needs” its defenses in the South China Sea in the face of a militarization process being pushed by the United States, and can deploy whatever equipment it wants on its own soil, China’s Defence Ministry said on 25 February. The United States has accused China of militarizing the disputed waters. Beijing, for its part, has been angered by “freedom of navigation” air and sea patrols the United States has conducted near islands China claims in the South China Sea. ([Reuters](#))

‘China will change policy if India patrols South China Sea’

Patrolling the South China Sea with the US will betray India’s hostility towards China, a powerful neighbour

that can change its India policy and potentially create a lot of trouble for New Delhi, a top Chinese expert has warned. India should focus more on building “harmonious bilateral military relations” with China because of the long-standing border dispute, which it sees as the biggest security challenge, the expert said. ([Hindustan Times](#))

Asean ministers resent China's moves to “militarise” South China Sea

Foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) adopted a statement 27 February expressing veiled resentment over China’s building of artificial islands and fortifying of its garrison in the South China Sea, without specifically naming the country. The foreign ministers noted in the statement that they “remained seriously concerned over the recent and ongoing developments” in the South China Sea. ([Bangkok Post](#))

Japan and Philippines Sign Defense Agreement Amid Regional Uncertainty

Japan will supply the Philippines with defense equipment after leaders from the two nations signed an agreement 29 February as tensions remain high in the disputed South China Sea region. The agreement will also include technology supplies and joint development projects. The agreement is the first of its kind for Japan in the region. ([International Business Times](#))

With eye on China's rise, Australia to boost defence spending by \$21 bln

Australia will increase defence spending by nearly US\$21.6 billion over the next 10 years, seeking to protect its strategic and trade interests in the Asia-Pacific as the United States and its allies grapple with China's rising power. The defence strategic plan was designed in mind of the changing nature of regional security, particularly China's economic and military rise and an increased U.S. focus on the Asia-Pacific. ([Reuters](#))

China accuses US of militarizing South China Sea

China accused the U.S. of militarizing the South China Sea, just days after it was revealed Beijing had deployed surface-to-air missiles on an island in the hotly disputed area. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters that patrols by U.S. military aircraft and Navy vessels, along with joint exercises involving regional partners were the true

reason why concerns were growing over peace and stability. ([Daily Mail](#))

China Missile Move Sparks New Questions over South China Sea

China sparked new questions about its intentions in the South China Sea after it deployed surface-to-air missiles to a contested island, a move that came just months after President Xi Jinping promised not to militarize the disputed atolls. Satellite images showed two batteries of eight HQ-9 surface-to-air missile launchers and a radar system were deployed on Woody Island sometime after February 3. ([Bloomberg](#))

U.S. and EU warn China on need to respect South China Sea ruling

The United States and the European Union warned China that it should respect an international court ruling expected later this year on its dispute with the Philippines over territory in the South China Sea. China claims virtually all the South China Sea and rejects the authority of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague hearing the dispute, even though Beijing has ratified the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea on which the case is based. ([Reuters](#))

South China Sea takes center stage at U.S.-ASEAN summit

President Barack Obama and allies from Southeast Asia will turn their attention to China on Tuesday on the second day of a summit intended to improve commercial links and provide a united front on maritime disputes with Beijing. After a first day focused on trade and economic issues, Obama and his counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations will try to arrive at a common position on the South China Sea during a second day of talks at Sunnylands, a California resort. ([Business Insider](#))

U.S. and India consider joint patrols in South China Sea: U.S. official

The United States and India have held talks about conducting joint naval patrols that a U.S. defence official said could include the disputed South China Sea, a move that would likely anger Beijing, which claims most of the waterway. Washington wants its regional allies and other Asian nations to take a more united stance against China over the South China Sea, where tensions have spiked in the wake of Beijing's construction of seven man-made islands in the Spratly archipelago. ([Reuters](#))

China warns on South China Sea as US, India consider joint naval patrols

China on Thursday responded to a Reuters report that the US and India are discussing joint naval patrols in the disputed South China Sea, warning that interference from countries outside the region threatens peace and stability. "No cooperation between any countries should be directed at a third party," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said in an emailed statement to Reuters, in response to a request for comment on the report published on Wednesday. ([The Economic Times](#))

India, Brunei discuss South China Sea dispute

Brunei on Tuesday held discussion with an Indian delegation led by Vice-President Hamid Ansari on Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea which has the potential to affect free maritime traffic in Southeast Asia. An Indian military source in Brunei said the defence cooperation will provide both sides the institutional foundation for more collaborative work on maritime security and secure India's energy lanes to Brunei. ([The Hindu](#))

China says U.S. seeks 'hegemony' after South China Sea sailing

China accused the United States of seeking maritime hegemony in the name of freedom of navigation after a U.S. Navy destroyer sailed within 12 nautical miles of a disputed island in the South China Sea. The guided-missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur passed near Triton Island in the Paracel Islands, in what the Pentagon said was a challenge to attempts by China, Taiwan and Vietnam to restrict navigation rights and freedoms. ([Reuters](#))

Japan Forms New Air Wing to Fend off China's Advances in East China Sea

For the first time in about 50 years, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) has stood up a new air wing consisting of Mitsubishi F-15J all-weather air superiority fighters at Naha Air Base, located in the capital city of Okinawa, Japan's most southern prefecture, according to local media reports. The stationing of additional fighter jets is part of Tokyo's efforts to enhance the defenses of the Ryukyu Islands chain (known in Japanese as the Nansei islands), which stretches southwest from Kyushu to Taiwan. ([The Diplomat](#))

COMMENTARIES

India Is Making a Move on the South China Sea

- *Harsh V. Pant*

At a time when China is deploying advanced radar systems to its man-made island in Cuarteron Reef in the Spratly Islands archipelago and the United States is nudging its allies to carry out their own freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea to challenge China's controversial assertions of maritime sovereignty, India's role in the dispute is also assuming a new dimension.

It was recently reported in sections of the media that the United States and India have held talks about conducting joint naval patrols that could possibly include the disputed South China Sea. U.S. and Indian government officials were quick to dismiss the report. Washington suggested that while the U.S. and India have a shared vision of peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia, the two countries were not planning joint maritime patrols in the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. New Delhi also argued that there was no change in its policy of joining an international military effort only under the UN flag.

China, not surprisingly, reacted swiftly and angrily, warning the United States and India that “[c]ountries from outside the area must stop pushing forward the militarization of the South China Sea, cease endangering the sovereignty and national security of littoral countries in the name of ‘freedom of navigation,’ and harming the peace and stability of the region.”

Even though it seems clear that the U.S. and India are not yet politically ready for joint patrols, the trial balloon itself is indicative of the rapidly evolving Indian position on one of the key disputes in the Asian strategic landscape. A number of factors are forcing India's hand. The United States itself has been forced to adopt a more robust posture in the Indo-Pacific. The dramatic acceleration in U.S. military commitment to the region is largely a function of the astonishing rise of China. China is today on the cusp of becoming a serious regional military power and this transition appears all the more menacing because of its aggressive posturing in the East and South China Seas, challenging the freedom of navigation in these waters and open access to the global commons.

In their recent high-level joint statements, both the United States and India have repeatedly declared their support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, signaling that the Modi government is not reluctant to highlight New Delhi's convergence with Washington on regional issues. India's engagements with states like Japan, Vietnam, and Philippines have become more serious. India has publicly supported Vietnam and Philippines in their disputes with China. Indian naval ships have been visiting Vietnam in the South China Sea and the two nations have continued to cooperate on hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea, despite Beijing's warnings.

India and Japan have also taken a public stand on South China Sea issue in recent years. During Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India in December last year, the two nations called upon all states to avoid unilateral actions that could lead to tensions in the region in view of the critical importance of open sea lanes of communications in the South China Sea for regional energy security, trade, and commerce, which underpin the continued peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. India and Japan also underscored the need for full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and an early conclusion of the negotiations to establish a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea by consensus. China promptly expressed its disapproval of this by labeling India and Japan as “countries outside the region.”

Make no mistake: India is charting a new course on South China Sea. Though its full implications will come to the fore only after some time, it is clear that it will have significant impact on how regional states and the United States view India as a regional balancer in the Asia-Pacific.

Source: *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2016

ASEAN Centrality: Still Alive and Kicking

- *Henrick Z. Tsjeng*

The Recent United States-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit at Sunnylands, California, was hailed for consolidating the US rebalance to Asia. The Joint Statement of the Summit reiterated major principles to guide the trajectory of the US-ASEAN relationship

and upheld the validity of ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific. Amid concerns that ASEAN centrality is being undermined by major power politics, the Sunnylands Summit is an affirmation of its continuing strength rather than a sign of its weakness.

ASEAN centrality, the principle by which ASEAN countries maintain their leadership role in the regional architecture, envisions that the 10-member grouping can and should engage with extra regional powers, while always upholding ASEAN interests, and never allowing external powers to push their own agendas in the region.

Challenges to ASEAN Centrality from Cambodia to Malaysia

The notion of ASEAN centrality has been challenged in recent times, as ASEAN seems to be increasingly pulled in different directions by major power rivalry, especially between the United States and China. This appears evident in the South China Sea disputes, which has more than once posed challenges to the solidarity and centrality of ASEAN. Many observers are increasingly pessimistic of the ability of ASEAN to hold together as a regional group and to continue playing the leading role in regional cooperation. However, such pessimism is for most part unwarranted, for now at least.

Such doubt is based on the appearance of ASEAN solidarity, on whether a joint declaration is issued or not, and failed to take into account the progress made in many aspects of cooperation in ASEAN. This doubt largely began when the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Cambodia failed to issue a joint communique for the first time in ASEAN's history.

That outcome was attributed to the influence of China on the then ASEAN Chair, Cambodia, not to include any reference to the South China Sea dispute in the joint communique. That was seen as a major political setback for ASEAN solidarity, though it was redeemed by a subsequent statement of principles on the South China Sea issued by the ASEAN foreign ministers.

What was not perceived was the continuance of regional defence cooperation, which grew at a steady pace. Defence initiatives under the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), such as the ASEAN

Defence Interaction Programmes and the Logistics Support Framework, continued apace. Ultimately, the incident in Cambodia was an aberration and did not affect ASEAN-led cooperation in other areas; ASEAN unity was not severely compromised.

Nonetheless, even defence cooperation did not appear immune from the vagaries of major power politics. In recent years, the US has been more active in pushing ASEAN as a grouping to be more forthright on the South China Sea issue, even as China firmly insists that the disputes, seen as bilateral issues, have no place in ASEAN-level dialogues. This was the case during the 3rd ADMM-Plus in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, which issued no joint declaration.

Unfounded fears

In the wake of that meeting, many observers feared that ASEAN was losing its centrality. While there are reasons to be concerned about the increasing prominence of major power rivalry, these sentiments, however, failed to grasp the strength of ASEAN unity as it worked behind the scenes.

For example, the ADMM Retreat, held one day before the 3rd ADMM-Plus, yielded an important outcome – the agreement to set up the Direct Communication Link initiative, which would enhance response coordination during an emergency situation. This was a milestone that was achieved with little fanfare, owing to the relatively higher profile of the non-issuance of a joint declaration the following day.

Moreover, given the likely disagreement between the US, China and other countries over the inclusion of the South China Sea issue, ASEAN countries had in fact demonstrated their unity and centrality in the 3rd ADMM-Plus by not issuing a joint declaration that would have included the issue. Instead, the Malaysian Chair released a Chairman's Statement—which did not require the consensus of all parties—that mentioned the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, as well as the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The Sunnylands Summit: ASEAN Centrality Affirmed

The Sunnylands Summit accorded the US host an opportunity to push its agenda onto ASEAN, yet, it did not get any explicit mention of the South China Sea into the Joint Statement. While the fifth paragraph

of the Joint Statement expressed support for ASEAN centrality, the following four paragraphs in fact played out that centrality: much was mentioned about the importance of peaceful resolution of disputes as well as adherence to international law; but the South China Sea disputes in and of themselves were not even mentioned, although they were implicit in these four paragraphs.

It is likely that the US is growing increasingly supportive of ASEAN centrality and has, at least for now, backed off from pushing its agenda on the South China Sea disputes in the discussions.

This is ASEAN centrality at work, which emphasises that great power politics should not hijack ASEAN's agenda while ASEAN continues to lead the agenda in its external engagement. That is not to say that ASEAN is sweeping the South China Sea problem "under the rug", a criticism constantly levelled at the group; the Sunnylands Joint Statement emphasised maritime security and called for adherence to the Law of the Sea and the safeguarding of freedom of navigation and overflight – all-encompassing values that both ASEAN and the US are able to agree on regarding the South China Sea disputes.

Even though ASEAN centrality may have been challenged by major power rivalry in recent times, much progress on cooperation, both within ASEAN and with dialogue partners, has taken place. To simply harp on the apparent divisions within ASEAN arising from lack of joint declarations, is to paint a distorted picture of the ASEAN centrality dynamic. Nonetheless, ASEAN must continue to make sure that it speaks with a unified voice and expands the scope of its cooperation, so as not lose its solidarity, relevance, and centrality.

Source: RSIS, February 29, 2016

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