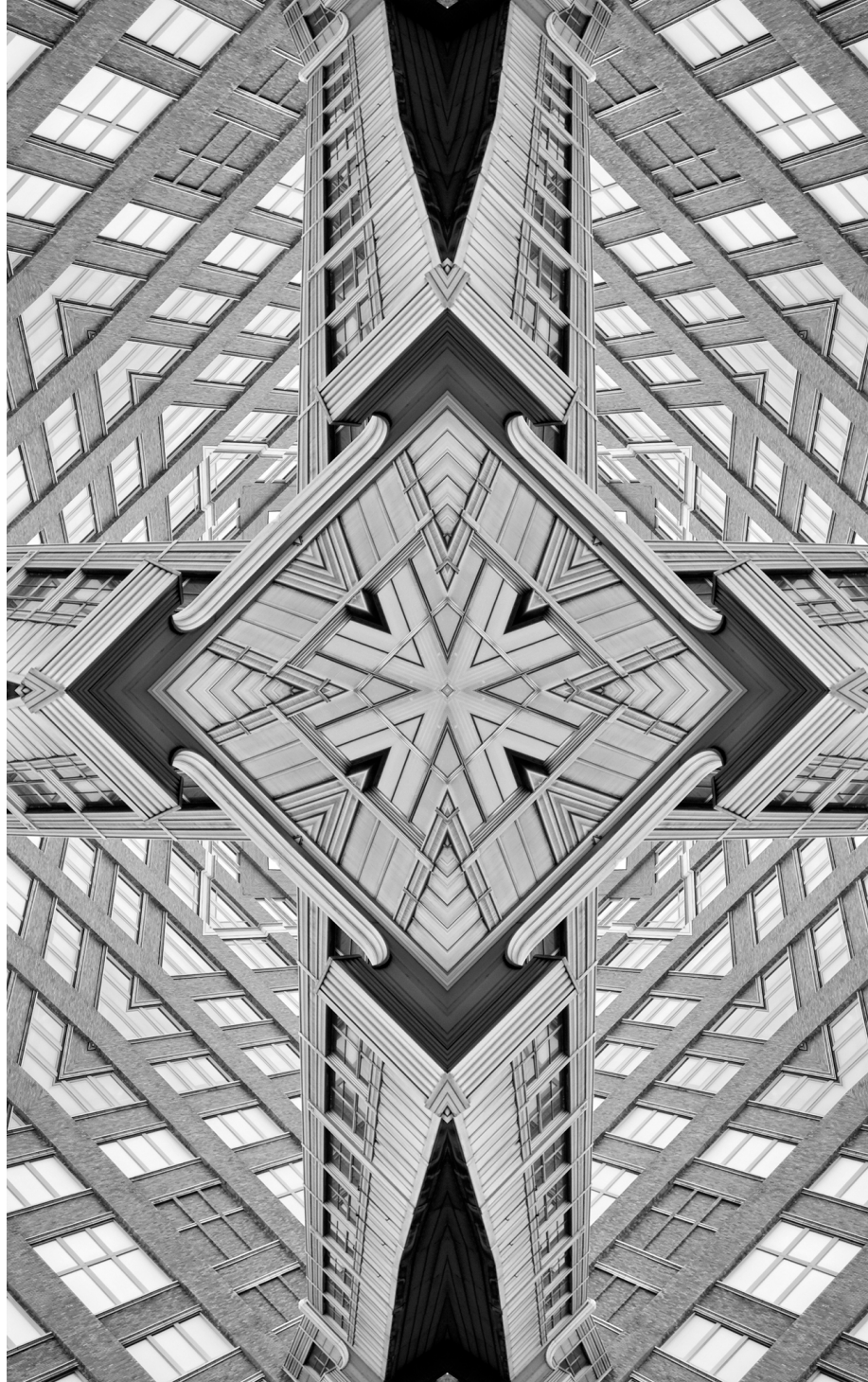


Issue

Brief

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India's Defence Diplomacy: A Strategic Response to China in the Modi Years

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In the past decade, India has successfully demonstrated the three pillars of effective deterrence—capability, credibility, and communication—in its strategic posture towards China. It has bolstered its defence diplomacy with key partners in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and across the broader Indo-Pacific region, through regular joint military exercises, military officers exchange programmes, frequent high-level diplomatic visits, and the conclusion of bilateral defence agreements. Collectively, these efforts have reinforced India's standing as a formidable power in the Eastern Hemisphere.

On 17 September 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping embarked on his inaugural visit to India during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term. Only a week earlier, more than 200 soldiers from China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) trespassed into Indian territory in the Chumar sector of Eastern Ladakh.¹ These PLA personnel arrived equipped with cranes and bulldozers, to construct roads on the Indian side and deploy surveillance cameras. The military standoff soon escalated, casting a shadow over Xi's state visit to India. It marked Modi's first encounter with China's offensive deterrence.²

Throughout the past decade, India-China relations have experienced a series of setbacks that have compelled India to explore avenues in its military diplomacy that would enhance deterrence. Initially cautious, this approach aimed to foster a *modus vivendi* with China. However, major bilateral episodes—notably the Doklam standoff and the Galwan incident—pushed India to adopt a proactive approach against China. Utilising two regional case studies, this brief demonstrates India's success in the last decade in projecting capability, credibility, and communication—the three essential aspects of effective deterrence against China.

Malabar Naval Exercises and Defence Diplomacy

The Chumar incident was followed in 2014 by two Chinese attack submarines, including a nuclear-powered one, being dispatched to the Indian Ocean as part of the Chinese Navy's flotilla.³ The submarines docked at a Sri Lankan port for refuelling and resupply, posing potential security risks to the peninsula. The Modi government recognised the immediate imperative of devising regional strategies in response to such manoeuvres by the Chinese military. The response involved bolstering its defence diplomacy with key stakeholders in South Asia and Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

In this context, the Malabar naval exercises emerged as a prominent strategy. In 2015, India and the US agreed to incorporate Japan as a permanent participant in these exercises. This marked a significant step towards consolidating the naval capabilities of three major navies in the Eastern Hemisphere, all of which have encountered challenges in their relations with China. In 2020, the group expanded and included Australia as the fourth member. The Malabar exercises have provided the participating nations with a shared platform for exchanging doctrines, refining training skills, and enhancing operational coordination to bolster regional security.

The scope of the exercise has broadened to encompass carrier-strike group operations, maritime patrol and reconnaissance operations, surface and anti-submarine warfare, helicopter cross-deck operations, and underway replenishment.⁴ Over the past decade, these exercises have been conducted in various regions and countries, including the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Philippine Sea, East China Sea, Guam, Japan, and the South Pacific Ocean. Today, the Malabar exercises have become the foremost naval diplomacy tool in Asia.

As anticipated, the Chinese government is critical of the increasing naval cooperation among democracies in the region. India's collaboration with US forces within the Indo-Pacific framework and its emphasis on enhancing maritime domain awareness have drawn condemnation.⁵ China is particularly angered by India's scrutiny of Chinese vessels transporting dual-use goods to Pakistan, resulting in their subsequent seizure by India.^a

a India's membership in the Wassenaar Arrangement, where China's bid for a seat has been repeatedly rejected, affords it the legal authority to regulate and confiscate dual-use items with potential applications in missiles and nuclear technology.

Malabar Naval Exercises and Defence Diplomacy

Furthermore, the Malabar exercises have helped India procure advanced sensors and weapon systems from the US and Japan.⁶ These arms sales and the resulting familiarity with each other's military capabilities and interoperability have the potential to undermine any Chinese aspirations for regional hegemony in Asia. Therefore, the Malabar exercises are an ideal defence diplomacy initiative for responding to and deterring China.

“The Malabar exercises provide participating nations with a shared platform for exchanging doctrines, refining training skills, and enhancing operational coordination.”

Defence Diplomacy with Southeast Asian States

India's commercial and strategic interests and commitment to freedom of navigation are hinged on maintaining stability in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific. Given China's coercive tactics and expansionist policies, there is a risk of jeopardising Indian interests and undermining the rules-based order in the region. Consequently, Indian defence diplomacy has fostered deeper partnerships with key Southeast Asian states; countries like Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines have strengthened their ties with India, diversifying their strategic options and hedging against Chinese influence.

In November 2015, Singapore finalised a Defence Cooperation Agreement, followed by the inaugural Defence Minister's Dialogue in June 2016. Subsequently, in November 2017, India and Singapore sealed a naval cooperation agreement to bolster maritime security, mutual logistics support, and joint exercises.⁷ Noteworthy features of this pact included temporary deployment from each other's facilities and streamlined access to Singapore's port for refuelling and berthing. This accord extended the operational reach of the Indian Navy east of the Malacca Strait and strengthened military ties with multiple Southeast Asian states. The comprehensive partnership includes crucial agreements on Submarine Rescue Support, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and cyber security.⁸

Furthermore, Vietnam and the Philippines have intensified their defence collaboration with India under Modi. Vietnam and India elevated their military relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, holding their inaugural security dialogue in 2018. Their Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and People, established in 2020, was followed by a similar agreement in 2022, facilitating mutual logistics support; it was the first such accord that Vietnam has signed with any country.⁹

In recent years, China's persistent encroachment into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and harassment of the latter's oil and gas operations have sparked disputes.¹⁰ For instance, Chinese forces destroyed nearly one hundred Vietnamese boats between 2014 and 2022. The ongoing Chinese intimidation has drawn Vietnam closer to India, seeking political and military support. Despite Beijing's warnings, the Indian government consistently backs these Southeast Asian states against China on international platforms.¹¹ Indeed, since 2020, India's rhetoric regarding Chinese coercion in the South China Sea has toughened, complemented by naval deployments in the region.

Defence Diplomacy with Southeast Asian States

Furthermore, India has provided material support to Vietnam. It has extended a US\$100-million credit line to Vietnam to procure 12 patrol vessels from Larsen and Toubro Shipyard in Chennai.¹² Moreover, India presented a missile corvette, *INS Kirpan*, to the Vietnamese Navy in June 2023.¹³ There are also ongoing considerations regarding the potential sale of BrahMos missiles to Vietnam.¹⁴ Vietnam has emerged as a cornerstone of Indian defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia and constitutes a pillar of India's 'Act East' policy and an anchor in India's Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Philippines, for its part, has emerged as a crucial partner for the Indian armed forces since 2016, as well as an export destination for defence goods. Historically, India-Philippines relations were among the least developed in the region, with previous Philippine governments primarily focused on balancing relations between the US and China. However, former President Rodrigo Duterte's visible antipathy towards the US and concerns about China prompted him to seek defence partnerships in the region, elevating the prominence of Indian defence diplomacy in the Philippines' security framework.

Modi's attendance at the ASEAN and East Asia Summits in Manila in 2017, and Duterte's subsequent visit to New Delhi in 2018, laid the groundwork for deeper defence collaboration.¹⁵ Under Duterte and his successor President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., bilateral defence ties have flourished, with Indian naval warships frequently visiting Philippine ports and the two navies conducting joint exercises.¹⁶

Further, the Indian government, for the first time, agreed to sell three batteries of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippine Marine Corps.¹⁷ At the fourth Philippines-India Joint Defence Cooperation Committee meeting in March 2023, India also agreed to post a defence attaché in Manila to oversee defence and security affairs.¹⁸ Additionally, training, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, maritime domain awareness, and white shipping information exchanges have commenced. The bilateral relationship appears to be evolving into a defining regional partnership, serving their mutual interests, particularly concerning China.


Chinese Perception of Indian Military Diplomacy

The Chinese defence discourse frequently highlights shifts in India's foreign strategy since Modi came to power, emphasising improvements in India's military relations with Japan, the US, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Australia.¹⁹ India's expanding interests in the South China Sea and its use of related disputes to counter Chinese actions along the border have gained attention.²⁰ Following the Galwan incident, China believes that Indian activity in the South China Sea region has surged, restricting China's resource investment along its Indian border.

Furthermore, according to China, India perceives the Indian Ocean as its strategic domain, potentially leading to an India-centric regional order through the control of key maritime channels.²¹ India is also competing with China as a development model in the Global South and is seeking to emerge as a leading force in maintaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific through robust military diplomacy. With the completion of the BrahMos missile sale to the Philippines, China is apprehensive that India will soon become one of the primary sources of weapon supplies for countries in Southeast Asia.²²

India has historically refrained from commenting on Chinese coercive and expansionist actions in Asia, but this has changed in recent years. India has begun to assertively oppose such policies. India's vocal opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative, support for the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea judgement against China's 'Nine-Dash Line' in the South China Sea, emphasis on a rules-based order, and advocacy for a free and open Indo-Pacific have bolstered democratic responses to China.

In addition, India's defence trade trajectory is set to witness growth in the coming decade. Indian weapons platforms have gradually gained recognition for their performance, contrasting with perceptions of subpar quality associated with Chinese defence goods. Consequently, India is poised to emerge as a major supplier of defence goods to countries on China's periphery, shaping long-term strategic partnerships and serving as a strategic response to China in the region.

Finally, the increasing frequency of joint military exercises, exchange programmes for officials in military training establishments, regular high-level visits, and the conclusion of numerous bilateral defence agreements have collectively reshaped India's image as a power in the Eastern Hemisphere. India's rising profile serves as a counterbalance to potential Chinese hegemony in the region, given its substantial size, population, economy, military, and diplomatic capabilities. Consequently, India's military diplomacy is expected to intensify further, posing challenges to China's strategic position in the region. 

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