

This Week in Asia/ Politics

## South China Sea: India sends warships as ‘subtle reminder’ to Beijing

Southeast Asia welcomes India’s presence ‘with open arms’ as a way of counterbalancing China’s growing assertiveness, say New Delhi-based observers

Germany also separately dispatched warships to the region earlier this month to support the ‘international rules-based order’, its defence chief said



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Guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi of the Indian Navy arrives in Singapore on May 6 to strengthen “friendship and cooperation”. Photo: X/Sajidaxyz

India has dispatched warships to the [South China Sea](#) this month, in a move engineered to send Beijing “subtle reminders” about the importance of upholding international law, analysts say.

Though there is a danger that the ships could provoke an “aggressive response” from China, New Delhi-based observers told This Week in Asia that the region welcomed India’s presence “with open arms”.

Indian guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi, fleet tanker INS Shakti and submarine hunter INS Kiltan arrived in [Singapore](#) on May 6 to strengthen “friendship and cooperation”, Indian navy spokesman Commander Vivek Madhwal said at the time.

The INS Kiltan then sailed on to [Vietnam](#)’s Cam Ranh Bay, arriving on May 12 for exchanges and a joint maritime exercise with the Vietnamese navy. That same day, the INS Delhi and INS Shakti arrived at [Malaysia](#)’s Kota Kinabalu to take part in maritime drills.

Separately, [Germany](#) dispatched two warships on May 7 to show a “presence in the Indo-Pacific in support of the international rules-based order” amid rising regional tensions, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said.



Fighter jets fly over the Berlin-class replenishing ship A 1412 Frankfurt am Main of the German Navy as it leaves its home port on May 7 for deployment to the Indo-Pacific. Photo: AFP

Such naval deployments served as “subtle reminders to Beijing about the importance of adhering to international norms and respecting maritime law”, said Abhijit Singh, head of the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation think tank’s Maritime Policy Initiative, adding that they were “important signals of international concern regarding violations”.

“Without a unified front among like-minded nations to counter Chinese aggression, Beijing is unlikely to perceive isolated deployments as a significant threat,” he said.

“Given its limited naval resources and strategic interests primarily focused on the Indian Ocean, India would be ill-advised to pursue a confrontational strategy in the South China Sea alone.”

To create “a more meaningful impact”, Singh said concerted efforts would be needed with partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines – the last of which has been locked in a prolonged stand-off with China in recent months over the disputed South China Sea.

Despite the timing of the deployment, however, Singh said it was not a confrontational move aimed at Beijing, but rather part of “a broader strategy to enhance maritime security and promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific” that aligned with India’s decade-old “Act East” policy.



Visitors walk past a model of India's Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles at a defence expo in 2022, the year it signed a deal with the Philippines for the weapons. Photo: AFP

## Increasing acceptance

India's ties with Southeast Asia have improved in the years since its Act East policy was launched, but it was the signing of an agreement with the Philippines for Indian-made anti-ship cruise missiles [in 2022](#) that marked a major shift towards bolstering more strategic defence cooperation.

The first batch of BrahMos missiles arrived in the Philippines from India [last month](#) and while that has been the most prominent deal so far, there is growing regional interest in acquiring Indian-made defence equipment, according to Sripathi Narayanan, a Delhi-based defence analyst who focuses on India's military outreach to Southeast Asia.

He said Southeast Asian nations were "not averse" to widening partnerships with countries like India – especially given the asymmetric nature of their capabilities compared to China.

"India is welcomed in Southeast Asia with open arms," Narayanan told This Week in Asia.



### **India is welcomed in Southeast Asia with open arms** **Sripathi Narayanan, Delhi-based defence analyst**

Aswani RS, an Indo-Pacific analyst and assistant professor at the University of Petroleum and Energy Studies in India whose research interests include security matters, agreed that there was an increasing acceptance of India's presence among South China Sea littoral nations as a counterbalance to China's growing ["grey-zone" activities](#).

"But there is also the risk that this military posturing could provoke an aggressive response from China", she warned, adding that much would depend on whether recent stand-offs in the South China Sea escalated further.

"A minor flashpoint could potentially trigger a broader confrontation if not handled carefully by all parties involved."

Aswani noted that India had been conducting annual bilateral naval exercises with [Singapore](#) since 1994 and has similar naval cooperation agreements with other Southeast Asian nations.



Ships from the navies of India, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei take part in last year's weeklong Asean-India Maritime Exercise (AIME 2023). Photo: Indian Navy via Facebook/SingaporeNavy

The inaugural [Asean-India Maritime Exercise](#) was held [in May last year](#), involving nine ships, six aircraft, and more than 1,800 personnel from across the bloc's member states.

Building cooperation on other fronts such as the energy transition and [climate change](#), meanwhile, could strengthen India's relationships with the region and "enhance its strategic position", Aswani said.

Narayanan said India's navy had been among the first responders to a number of crises in Southeast Asia, including [the catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004](#).

The German naval ships dispatched to the region would be en route to this year's Rim of the Pacific exercise, a biennial event hosted by the US that involves 29 countries.

"Instead of sailing through the Atlantic Ocean, the German Navy opted for the Indian Ocean route," Sripathi said.

"Everyone is hedging their positions as the evolving global architecture and power dynamics are undergoing an uncertain transformation."