

## **Deepening Singapore-India Defence Cooperation**

C Raja Mohan and Ankush Ajay Wagle

### **Summary**

*The annual Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in November 2018 was the largest ever the two countries conducted. It celebrated the growing military partnership between India and the city state at a moment when the renewed great power rivalry has cast a dark shadow over the regional security environment of the Indo-Pacific. The planned expansion of the bilateral exercise to include Thailand promises to strengthen regional security cooperation in the eastern Indian Ocean.*

### **Introduction**

The expansive 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the India-Singapore bilateral naval exercises in November 2018 in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal reflected the growing depth of bilateral defence ties between the two countries. What began as a trust building exercise in the early 1990s – when India began to ‘Look East’ and Singapore supported India’s integration into the structures of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – has now become the foundation for a strong regional security partnership amidst the profound geopolitical turmoil enveloping the Indo-Pacific.

At the third Defence Ministers’ Dialogue in Vishakhapatnam – a port city on India’s Bay of Bengal coast – that followed the two-week long maritime exercise, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to build a more robust security partnership. India’s Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stated that India is entering a [‘new era in its defence partnership with Singapore’](#). Singapore’s Defence Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen welcomed India’s [‘continued engagement’](#) of the region and its active role in the development of the regional security architecture.

### **Large Scale Exercise**

The two sides conducted the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the annual Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal from 10 to 21 November 2018. Silver jubilee aside, this year’s SIMBEX is notable for its scale. The exercise covered an [‘extended geography’](#), with two harbour and sea phases each in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal respectively.

The participation of both navies was the largest since the exercise’s inception – the [‘multi-dimensional’](#) drills involved 30 ships, aircraft, and submarines. India’s fleet included a *Ranvir* class destroyer, two stealth frigates, four corvettes, and a fleet support ship and submarine each. Singapore dispatched two *Formidable* class stealth frigates, two missile corvettes, and one Littoral Mission Vessel, *Archer* class submarine, and Deep Sea Rescue Vehicle each. Aerially, India’s squad included maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters. Singapore’s force

included a marine reconnaissance aircraft, unmanned aerial systems and helicopters. A live missile firing took place. Singapore fired an *Aster* ‘anti-air’ missile and India fired a *Barak* missile. Subject matter expert exchanges complemented the drills.

Ng and Sitharaman also renewed the [Army Bilateral Agreement](#), signed in 2008 and first renewed in 2013. The agreement frames joint training exercises and permits Singaporean forces to train on Indian soil. The ministers also discussed the use of Indian firing ranges for testing ‘specialist weapons’ of the Singaporean Armed Forces. They noted intelligence and information sharing in maritime security and counter terrorism, and submarine rescue cooperation, as areas of collaboration. They hailed the growth in defence technology cooperation through joint working groups.

## Milestone in Relationship

These developments together mark another milestone in the close defence ties between India and Singapore. Today, the substantive relationship covers land, air, and sea. The army agreement is paralleled by similar agreements for the respective Air Forces (signed in 2007 and renewed in 2017) and Navies (signed in November 2017). Earlier this year, India and Singapore signed an agreement to facilitate mutual naval logistical support. Singapore has helped extend the effective reach of the Indian Navy east of the Malacca Strait. India, in turn, has provided Singapore overland facilities for training its army and air force.

The bilateral defence cooperation between India and Singapore over the last quarter of a century has developed in a time of peace. Today, amidst mounting great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, Singapore and India recognise that they need each other even more. The two sides also appreciate the importance of expanding the scope of their bilateral cooperation to include third countries.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore earlier this year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi alluded to a new trilateral exercise with Singapore and stated that India hoped to “[extend it to other ASEAN countries](#)”. In the [joint statement](#) issued after their meeting, Ng and Sitharaman said they “looked forward to the inaugural conduct of the India-Singapore-Thailand maritime exercise in the Andaman Sea in 2019”.

In November 2017, during his visit to New Delhi, Ng underlined the importance of Singapore and India strengthening their naval cooperation in the Andaman Sea. The launch of SIMBEX this year from Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands translates that understanding into a reality. Their proposed trilateral engagement with Thailand strengthens regional security cooperation in the Andaman Sea and the Straits of Malacca – a continuous body of water that connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

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Professor C Raja Mohan is Director at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [isascrm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isascrm@nus.edu.sg). Mr Ankush Ajay Wagle is a Research Assistant at ISAS. He can be contacted at [ankush@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ankush@nus.edu.sg). The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.