

# ISAS Brief

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## Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercises 2017:

### Why They Matter

*The Indian and the Singaporean navies recently took part in the Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercises 2017. These naval exercises allowed the two navies to further hone their skills and increase their interoperability. As two nations with shared interests in the Indian Ocean, it is sine qua non that India and Singapore pool their resources to tackle both traditional and non-traditional security threats.*

Dr Rupakjyoti Borah<sup>1</sup>

In May 2017, the Indian and the Singaporean navies recently took part in the Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercises 2017 (SIMBEX 2017). This comes close on the heels of the first International Maritime Review (IMR) organised by the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) on 15 May 2017 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, where warships from 21 nations, including Singapore, took part.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Warships from 20 countries dock at Singapore's first international maritime review <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/warships-from-20-countries-dock-at-singapore-s-first-8847012>

For SIMBEX 2017, INS Shivalik, INS Sahyadri, INS Jyoti, INS Kamorta and a P8-I aircraft took part from the Indian side while, from the Singaporean side, RSN Supreme, RSN Formidable, RSN Victory, a Maritime Patrol Aircraft Fokker F50, besides RSAF F-16 aircraft, joined these exercises, the 24<sup>th</sup> in the series.<sup>3</sup> INS Sahyadri and INS Kamorta were already in Singapore since 12 May 2017, while INS Shivalik and INS Jyoti joined the other Indian and Singaporean ships for the sea phase of the exercises. The harbour phase of the exercises took place between 18 and 20 May 2017 while the sea phase was conducted between 21 and 24 May 2017. The main thrust of these exercises was “anti-submarine warfare, integrated operations with surface, air and sub-surface forces, air defence and surface encounter exercise.”<sup>4</sup>

## **The Indo-Pacific Waters in a Flux**

While SIMBEX (earlier known as the *Lion King*) is an annual activity between India and Singapore which has been taking place since 1994, it assumes significance in the light of many recent developments in the region.

Firstly, the United States (US), under President Donald Trump, has been increasingly focussed on Northeast Asia, especially because of the increasing intensity and frequency of provocations from North Korea. This has allowed Beijing to spread its influence in the South China Sea region. It has carried out several intercepts of American military aircraft in recent months and has taken a stronger stance against countries like the Philippines. Last month, China launched its first domestically-built aircraft carrier and its second, after Liaoning.<sup>5</sup> This significantly alters the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region in the maritime arena.<sup>6</sup> India currently has only one active aircraft carrier.

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<sup>3</sup> Bilateral Exercise between Indian & Republic of Singapore Navy Simbex-17 Commences <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/mbErel.aspx?relid=161920>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> China's Homemade Aircraft Carrier Becomes Second in Xi's Fleet, <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-26/china-launches-first-indigenous-aircraft-carrier-second-overall>

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, Chinese jets intercept US aircraft over East China Sea, US says, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39971267>

Secondly, the deployment of the JS Izumo by Japan signals that it is unwilling to be left out of the stakes in the Indo-Pacific region. The JS Izumo, Japan's largest warship in the post-World War II-era, visited Singapore to take part in the IMR and is, thereafter, scheduled to visit ports in Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka before taking part in the Malabar naval exercises with India and the US in July this year. While the Malabar exercises initially began as a bilateral naval initiative between India and the US, Japan was later on inducted as a permanent member of the same.

Thirdly, recent news reports have emerged on Chinese President Xi Jinping "threatening" Philippines with war if Manila were to drill for oil in disputed waters.<sup>7</sup> If these reports are to be believed, there could be continued, if not escalating, maritime tensions in the region and they would represent an ominous sign of things to come.

Fourthly, the Maritime Silk Road is one part of the Belt and Road Initiative through which Beijing is attempting to spread its influence in the Indian Ocean region. Hence, New Delhi's outreach to the Southeast Asian nations like Singapore in the maritime arena is in keeping with its key interest of maintaining its influence in the wider Indian Ocean region.

## **Churning Ahead?**

India has been reaching out to the countries of Southeast Asia and East Asia as part of its "Act East" policy, which, until the Narendra Modi government took office in May 2014, was known by its earlier moniker, the "Look East" policy. The "Act East" policy aims to reenergise India's historical links with countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia. India conducts regular naval exercises with a host of countries in Southeast Asia. The Indian Navy, along with navies from the US, Japan and Australia, proved its worth to many countries in the region after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. Within 12 hours of the

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<sup>7</sup> Duterte says China's Xi threatened war if Philippines drills for oil <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-china-idUSKCN18F1DJ>

tsunami, Indian naval helicopters were already in Sri Lanka with relief materials. India also reached out to Maldives and Indonesia very promptly during this disaster.<sup>8</sup>

With Singapore, New Delhi signed the Defence Cooperation Agreement way back in 2003 which allows Singaporean defence personnel to train in India. This agreement was revised in 2015 during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Singapore.<sup>9</sup>

New Delhi will continue its maritime outreach to countries like Singapore and others in Southeast Asian keeping with its “Act East” policy. It needs to be noted that Beijing is rapidly making inroads into the Indian Ocean region with its outreach to countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar as far as building of port infrastructure is concerned. This has been worrying India as these ports lie in India’s immediate neighbourhood and some of them could also have military uses too. New Delhi already has a tri-services command at the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands which lie at the entrance of the Strait of Malacca and, hence, the Indian Navy plays a critical role in ensuring the safety of the sea lanes of communication in this part of the world.

Freedom of navigation is critical to the health of the Indian economy<sup>10</sup> and New Delhi is in no mood to cede its dominant position in the Indian Ocean region which it sees as its own backyard. In addition, unlike in the past when navies only needed to worry about traditional security threats, these days, non-traditional security threats like piracy, human-smuggling and narcotics-trafficking, among others, are also major worries. India has also been a victim of maritime terrorism as terrorists used the sea route to enter the city of Mumbai in November 2008 after which they unleashed mayhem in India’s commercial capital.

In the light of recent developments in the relationships among regional countries and in regional waters, both India and Singapore cannot afford to let their guard down in the maritime domain. Bilateral initiatives such as SIMBEX are indeed important and necessary as they prepare the respective navies to tackle both traditional and non-traditional security

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<sup>8</sup> IDSA, Tsunami Reveals Indian Military’s Humanitarian Response Capability, [http://www.idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/TsunamiRevealsIndianMilitarysHumanitarianResponseCapability\\_CUBhaskar\\_080105](http://www.idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/TsunamiRevealsIndianMilitarysHumanitarianResponseCapability_CUBhaskar_080105)

<sup>9</sup> Singapore, India Enhance Defence Cooperation. [https://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press\\_room/official\\_releases/nr/2015/nov/24nov15\\_nr.html#.WSU4x5KGN0w](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/nr/2015/nov/24nov15_nr.html#.WSU4x5KGN0w)

<sup>10</sup> The Economic Times, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/our-position-clear-we-are-for-freedom-of-navigation-through-south-china-sea-india/articleshow/57066915.cms>

threats in the maritime domain. India and Singapore would do well to heed the advice of the famous naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who in his seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783*, vouched “for American national greatness through control of the seas.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/mahan%E2%80%99s-naval-strategy-china-learned-it-will-america-forget-it>