

Indian warships enter South China Sea

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Four Indian warships last Saturday entered the South China Sea, where US has been repeatedly used as the pretext of “freedom of navigation” to engage in military provocations challenging China’s territorial claims. Guided missile stealth frigates, INS Satpura and INS Sahyadri, the sophisticated fleet support ship, INS Shakti, and the guided missile corvette, INS Kirch, left India on May 18 for a two-and-a-half-month operational deployment in the South China Sea and North West Pacific.

India’s naval exercise is aimed at extending its military reach beyond Indian Ocean into the Pacific. While aggressively pursuing its own strategic ambitions, the Indian intervention into South China Sea and beyond is in line with the US “pivot to Asia,” which includes preparing for war against China. Washington has been encouraging New Delhi to take a more aggressive stance in South East Asia and East Asia to counter China’s economic and diplomatic influence.

In particular, the US has urged India, which does not border the South China Sea and has no maritime disputes with China, to engage in naval patrols, including jointly with the US, in the area. Just two days before the Indian warships departed, the US and India held their first Maritime Security Dialogue to discuss “Asia-Pacific maritime challenges, naval cooperation, and multilateral engagement,” according to the US embassy in New Delhi.

Next month, the Indian ships will participate in joint Malabar naval exercises with US and Japan in Philippines waters near the South China Sea. The US has also been in the Philippines to more assertively press its territorial claims against China. Japan has previously participated in the annual bilateral US-India Malabar exercise, but this year will be the first time that Japan is taking part as a permanent member. It is a clear indication of a developing trilateral strategic alliance

aimed against China.

Commenting on the departure of its warships, an Indian Defence Ministry statement declared: “In a demonstration of its operational reach and commitment to India’s ‘Act East’ policy, the Indian Navy’s Eastern Fleet, under the command of Rear Admiral S.V. Bhokare, Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet, sailed out today.”

Encouraged by Washington, the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended the previous “Look East” policy—an economic and strategic outreach to East and Southeast Asia—into “Act East,” that is, a more aggressive intervention into the region. US officials have repeatedly pointed to the “convergence” between India’s “Act East” and Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.” It is clear that India’s naval patrol is a part of the US-led military build-up in Asia against China.

The Indian warships will make port calls at Cam Rahn Bay in Vietnam, Subic Bay in the Philippines, Sasebo in Japan, Busan in South Korea, Vladivostok in Russia and Port Klang in Malaysia. The defence ministry stated: “The visits to each port will last four days and are aimed at strengthening bilateral ties and enhancing inter-operability between the navies. During the stay in harbour, various activities, such as official calls and professional interaction between naval personnel of both the nations, have been planned.”

With the exception of Russia, the US has been strengthening its alliance and military ties with each of the countries named. Washington has been pressing India, along with allies such as Australia and Japan, to enhance its ability to collaborate and operate with other Asian countries in a bid to further consolidate a US-led encirclement of China. At the same time, the Indian defence ministry noted that the Indian fleet was “showing the flag” in a region that was “of vital strategic importance to India.”

The US and India have been rapidly expanding naval collaboration as part of their strategic partnership. Early this month, US and Indian officials began bilateral talks on countering Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean, including collaboration in anti-submarine warfare. In April, India and the US announced their agreement “in principle” on a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that would give the US armed forces access to Indian military ports and bases.

China has responded cautiously to the Indian naval deployment. After the Indian vessels set off, an unnamed senior Chinese official expressed Beijing’s concerns, telling journalists: “When there is some trouble in the South China Sea, India is worried. When Indian ships participate in maritime exercises in the South China Sea, of course China will show concern.” In a veiled criticism of the US, he accused Western powers of using the colonial tactic of “divide and rule” in Asia.

Speaking on Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying was more cautious. “We have noted the relevant report. Concerning the normal military cooperation we have no objection to that. We hope that military cooperation such as this is conducive to peace and regional stability,” she said.

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee began a four-day visit to China this week in which he was expected to raise series of issues with Beijing. These included China’s moves to block India’s attempt to get a UN ban against Masood Azhar, a leader of Jaish-e-Mohammad, a Pakistan-based armed Kashmiri-separatist group, and to oppose India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group that controls access to nuclear technology and fuel.

Despite its muted response, Beijing undoubtedly regards India’s latest naval deployment as a part of India’s closer integration into the US “pivot” which China is seeking to prevent. New Delhi has been exploiting Beijing’s concerns to try to extract economic and also strategic concessions from China, which is India’s largest trading partner.

India has dismissed China’s concerns, describing its deployment of warships into South China Sea, including in joint exercises with US and Japan, as “normal” moves that would not affect Mukherjee’s visit. Joint Secretary Pradeep Kumar Rawat declared: “Indian ship visits have been happening often, it’s

quite a normal thing, it isn’t only happening this time.”

However, India’s naval operations in South East Asia and East Asia are far from normal. Its armada of ships represents a marked military escalation in conditions where tensions in the South China Sea are rising sharply. The presence of Indian warships only increases the chance of a mistake or misunderstanding that could spark a conflict that would rapidly draw in the US and other powers.



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