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Exercise MILAN 2026 – India's Largest Multilateral Naval Exercise

18 February 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**SECURITY & DEFENCE****IR****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

The 13th edition of Exercise MILAN opened at Visakhapatnam from February 15–25, 2026, with over 70 nations participating — the largest edition in the exercise’s 31-year history — signalling India’s growing role as the organising hub of Indo-Pacific naval multilateralism.

EXERCISE MILAN — OVERVIEW

Exercise MILAN (meaning “meeting” in Hindi) is the Indian Navy’s signature **multilateral naval exercise**, held biennially and designed to foster **maritime interoperability, trust-building, and cooperation** among navies of the Indo-Pacific region.

13th edition (2026) key data:

Dates: **February 15–25, 2026**

Location: **Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh** (hosted by Eastern Naval Command)

Participating countries: **Over 70** — the largest in MILAN’s history

New participants: **Germany, Philippines, UAE**

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Year	Location	Countries
1995	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	4 (Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand)
2022	Visakhapatnam	39
2024	Visakhapatnam	50+
2026	Visakhapatnam	70+

MILAN was **originally hosted by the Andaman & Nicobar Command** (India’s only tri-service command). Since **2022**, the exercise was shifted to **Visakhapatnam** to accommodate the growing scale. This shift reflects the Eastern Naval Command’s expanding role in Indian Ocean maritime security.

ACTIVITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

Professional Programme:

Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) drills

Surface and Air Defence exercises

Harbour Phase: Subject Matter Expert (SME) exchanges, seminars on maritime domain awareness, international maritime law

Sea Phase: Complex manoeuvres, passage exercises, underway replenishment

Humanitarian Component:

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercises — increasingly critical given the Indian Ocean's disaster-prone coastlines (cyclones, tsunamis)

Medical assistance and evacuation drills

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Act East Policy and Maritime Outreach

MILAN is a direct instrument of India's **Act East Policy** (launched 2014) — deepening defence ties with Southeast Asian nations, particularly ASEAN members. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Singapore participate regularly.

MAHASAGAR Doctrine

Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the **MAHASAGAR** (Maritime Association for Holistic and Agile Security Across Regions) vision — a successor to the earlier SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine. MAHASAGAR broadens India's maritime security partnership framework to include the full Indian Ocean rim and beyond.

Countering China's Naval Expansion

China's **String of Pearls** strategy (network of ports and military bases in the Indian Ocean — Gwadar, Hambantota, Chittagong, Kyaukpyu, Djibouti) has prompted India to deepen multilateral naval engagements. MILAN provides a non-threatening platform for navies to build habits of cooperation without formal alliance commitments.

Invitation to Germany and Philippines

Germany's participation reflects the EU's growing Indo-Pacific strategy (EU Indo-Pacific Strategy 2021, Germany's National Security Strategy 2023) and post-Russia-Ukraine reorientation.

Philippines' inclusion signals India's deepening ties with a country directly embroiled in South China Sea disputes with China (Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal incidents in 2024).

EASTERN NAVAL COMMAND — KEY FACTS

HQ: Visakhapatnam (Vizag), Andhra Pradesh

AO: Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, Strait of Malacca (western end)

Major assets: INS Vikrant (aircraft carrier), submarines, destroyers, frigates

Notable commands: INS Arihant (nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, SSBN) operated under Eastern Command's strategic forces

Andaman & Nicobar Command: India's **only tri-service (Army+Navy+Air Force) command**; crucial for monitoring Malacca Strait

RELATED BILATERAL EXERCISES (INDIA-NAVY)

Exercise	Countries	Focus
INDRA Navy	India-Russia	Bilateral maritime
Tasman Saber	India-US-Australia	Tri-lateral
SIMBEX	India-Singapore	Bilateral; oldest bilateral naval exercise (since 1994)
Samudra Shakti	India-Indonesia	Bilateral
Varuna	India-France	Bilateral
AUSINDEX	India-Australia	Bilateral ASW
Malabar	India-US-Japan (±Australia)	Quad naval exercise

UPSC RELEVANCE

Exercise MILAN (years, locations, countries count), Eastern Naval Command, Andaman & Nicobar Command, MAHASAGAR doctrine, Act East Policy (2014), SAGAR (2015). **Mains GS-2:** India's maritime security architecture; multilateral engagement in Indo-Pacific; India as net security provider; India-ASEAN defence cooperation. **GS-3:** Indian Navy modernisation; INS Vikrant commissioning.

★ **FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA**

EXERCISE MILAN 2026:

Edition: **13th** | Dates: Feb 15–25, 2026 | Host city: **Visakhapatnam**

Countries: **70+** | New participants: Germany, Philippines, UAE

Hosting command: **Eastern Naval Command** (shifted from A&N Command in 2022)

MILAN started: **1995** (A&N Islands); founder countries: Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand

Frequency: **Biennial** | Name meaning: “Meeting” in Hindi

EASTERN NAVAL COMMAND:

HQ: **Visakhapatnam** | Area: Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea

India’s only tri-service command: **Andaman & Nicobar Command** (HQ Port Blair)

India’s aircraft carrier INS Vikrant: Commissioned **September 2, 2022**; built by Cochin Shipyard Limited

INDIA’S MARITIME DOCTRINES:

SAGAR (2015): Security and Growth for All in the Region (PM Modi, Mauritius)

MAHASAGAR: Maritime Association for Holistic and Agile Security Across Regions (PM Modi, 2025)

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI): 7 pillars (2019)

CHINA’S STRING OF PEARLS (INDIAN OCEAN):

Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Djibouti (East Africa)

India’s counter-strategy: Chabahar (Iran), Sittwe (Myanmar), Sabang (Indonesia), Oman/Duqm port access

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

SIMBEX (India-Singapore): Oldest bilateral Indian naval exercise (since 1994)

Malabar Exercise: Now Quad naval exercise — India, USA, Japan, Australia

Varuna: India-France naval exercise (annual)

Tiger Triumph: India-US tri-service exercise (since 2019)

Sources: Drishti IAS, PIB, The Hindu

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