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Exercise MILAN 2026 – India's Multilateral Naval Exercise and Indo- Pacific Maritime Strategy

20 February 2026

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

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WHY IN NEWS

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated the 13th edition of Exercise MILAN at Visakhapatnam on February 20, 2026 — the largest MILAN ever, with **74 participating nations**, underscoring India's growing centrality in Indo-Pacific multilateral naval diplomacy.

WHAT IS EXERCISE MILAN?

MILAN ("Meeting" in several Indian languages) is India's **biennial multilateral naval exercise** hosted by the Indian Navy. It is one of the oldest and most significant naval engagement platforms in the Indo-Pacific region.

Feature	Details
Edition	13th (2026)
Venue	Visakhapatnam (Eastern Naval Command, ENC)
Inaugural Date	February 20, 2026
Inaugurated By	Defence Minister Rajnath Singh
Participating Nations	74 (largest in history)
Founded	1995
Original Venue	Port Blair, Andaman & Nicobar Islands
Frequency	Biennial (every 2 years)

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF MILAN

MILAN 1995 (1st Edition):

Held at Port Blair (Andaman & Nicobar Islands)

Participating nations: **4** (Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand)

Concept: Combine professional military exchange with cultural interaction

Philosophy: India as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean Region

Growth Phase (2000s–2010s):

Gradually expanded to include South Asian neighbours, ASEAN navies, and Indian Ocean littoral states

By MILAN 2018: ~17 nations

Focus evolved from basic interoperability to complex naval exercises including PASSEX (passage exercises), EEZ surveillance, and Search & Rescue (SAR)

MILAN 2022 (Shift to Visakhapatnam):

Moved from Port Blair to **Visakhapatnam** for the first time

42 nations participated

Reflected India’s ambition to host a larger, more complex multilateral naval forum

Eastern Naval Command became the host command

MILAN 2026 (13th Edition):

74 nations — nearly double the 2022 edition

Largest multilateral naval exercise hosted by India

Signals India’s expanding maritime influence and the broader Indo-Pacific coalition-building

WHY VISAKHAPATNAM?

Visakhapatnam (Vizag) hosts the **Eastern Naval Command (ENC)** — one of India’s three naval commands (others: Western at Mumbai, Southern at Kochi).

ENC’s strategic significance:

Commands the Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and the eastern approaches

Proximity to the **Malacca Strait** — the world’s most important maritime chokepoint

Controls India’s eastward naval power projection toward Southeast Asia

Key bases: Visakhapatnam (main), Port Blair (Andaman & Nicobar), INS Baaz (Car Nicobar), INS Jarawa (Andaman)

EXERCISE MILAN 2026 — KEY OBJECTIVES

1. Interoperability: Practice joint manoeuvres, communication protocols, and tactical procedures across diverse national navies with different equipment and doctrines.

2. Professional Exchange: Seminars on submarine rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), counter-piracy, and cyber maritime security.

3. Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE): Knowledge transfer between participating navies on seabed mapping, hydrography, and underwater domain awareness.

4. Cultural Diplomacy: The “City Parade” and cultural events build soft power and people-to-people contacts.

5. Indo-Pacific Architecture: MILAN is a building block of India’s broader Indo-Pacific strategy — demonstrating that India can anchor a rules-based maritime order without the exclusive club structures of Cold War-era alliances.

MILAN AND INDIA’S STRATEGIC CALCULUS

Act East Policy and ASEAN Centrality

MILAN is an operational expression of India’s **Act East Policy** (launched 2014, originally “Look East” from 1991). The inclusion of all 10 ASEAN member-state navies and the Pacific Island nations in MILAN 2026 reflects the policy’s deepening.

ASEAN’s centrality in India’s strategic thinking: India recognises ASEAN’s “ASEAN Way” (consensus, non-interference, multilateralism) as compatible with its own preference for voluntary coalitions over mandatory military alliances.

QUAD and Minilateralism

MILAN exists alongside — but is distinct from — the **QUAD** naval framework. While QUAD (India, USA, Japan, Australia) is a strategic grouping with a more focused agenda on China’s assertiveness, MILAN is genuinely **inclusive** — even non-aligned nations participate.

This duality is deliberate: India maintains strategic autonomy by engaging in broader minilateral frameworks (QUAD) while hosting inclusive multilateral exercises (MILAN) — giving it influence in both camps.

India as “Net Security Provider”

The term was first articulated by PM Manmohan Singh at the 2007 Shangri-La Dialogue. PM Modi’s 2015 **SAGAR doctrine** (Security and Growth for All in the Region) deepened this:

India provides Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) across the IOR

Conducts hydrographic surveys for smaller island nations

Shares domain awareness via **Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)**, launched 2018 at Gurugram

KEY MARITIME CONCEPTS TESTED IN MILAN

PASSEX (Passage Exercise): Conducted when naval ships are in proximity — tests basic tactical interoperability without pre-planning.

CASEX (Carrier Exercise): Carrier group tactical procedures (relevant given INS Vikrant's participation).

GOPLAT (Gas and Oil Platform Protection): Offshore critical infrastructure security — increasingly important given South China Sea disputes.

Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA): Submarine detection, tracking, and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) — critical given Chinese submarine presence in the IOR.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UPSC

GS-3 (Security): India's maritime security challenges, EEZ protection, anti-piracy, UNCLOS Article 121 (island vs. rock), Info Fusion Centre.

GS-2 (International Relations): India's multilateral naval diplomacy, Act East Policy, ASEAN, QUAD vs. MILAN dichotomy, India as net security provider.

GS-3 (Economy): 95% of India's trade by volume, 70% by value moves through sea lanes. Securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) is an economic necessity.

UPSC RELEVANCE

*Exercise MILAN — 13th edition, Visakhapatnam, 74 nations, inaugurated by Rajnath Singh; Eastern Naval Command; first edition 1995, Port Blair; SAGAR doctrine (2015); IFC-IOR (2018, Gurugram); Act East Policy (2014); QUAD. **Mains GS-2:** India's multilateral naval diplomacy; Act East Policy; Indo-Pacific security architecture; role of Indian Navy in regional security. **GS-3:** Maritime security challenges; UNCLOS; sea-based trade routes; India's strategic interests. **Interview:** "India participates in both QUAD and MILAN. Does this reflect strategic ambiguity or strategic autonomy? How should India balance exclusive partnerships with inclusive multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific?"*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
EXERCISE MILAN 2026 — KEY DATA:

Edition: **13th** | Venue: **Visakhapatnam** | Host command: **Eastern Naval Command (ENC)**

Inaugurated by: **Rajnath Singh** (Defence Minister) | Date: February 20, 2026

Participating nations: **74** (largest ever)

Founded: **1995** | Original venue: **Port Blair**, Andaman & Nicobar Islands

1st edition nations (4): Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand

Frequency: **Biennial**

EASTERN NAVAL COMMAND (ENC):

HQ: **Visakhapatnam**, Andhra Pradesh

Commander-in-Chief: Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C), ENC

Commands: Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, eastern approaches

Major bases: Vizag, Port Blair (INS Jarawa), INS Baaz (Car Nicobar)

INDIA'S THREE NAVAL COMMANDS:

Western Naval Command (WNC): Mumbai — Arabian Sea, western coast

Eastern Naval Command (ENC): Visakhapatnam — Bay of Bengal, eastern coast

Southern Naval Command (SNC): Kochi — training command

INDIA'S MARITIME DOCTRINES/CONCEPTS:

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

Act East Policy: Renamed from Look East (2014 Modi government); deepens ASEAN + Pacific ties

IFC-IOR: Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region (2018, Gurugram)

Net Security Provider: India's self-defined role; PM Manmohan Singh, Shangri-La 2007

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

QUAD: India, USA, Japan, Australia — informal strategic grouping (revived 2017)

UNCLOS: 1982 treaty; defines EEZ (200 nautical miles), continental shelf rights

India's EEZ: 2.37 million sq km

Malacca Strait: ~80,000 ships per year; world's busiest maritime chokepoint

India's sea trade: ~95% by volume, ~70% by value via sea routes

Sources: GKToday, AffairsCloud

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