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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

MILAN and the Indo-Pacific: India's Inclusive Naval Diplomacy in a Contested Ocean

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SECURITY & DEFENCE** **IR****GS PAPERS****GS2** **GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS2

GS3



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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India participates in both QUAD (a selective grouping) and MILAN (an inclusive 74-nation exercise). Does this reflect strategic ambiguity or a deliberate policy of strategic autonomy? Which approach better serves India's long-term interests in the Indo-Pacific?"

WHY IN NEWS

Exercise MILAN 2026 — the 13th edition of India's multilateral naval exercise — was inaugurated at Visakhapatnam with a record **74 participating nations**, prompting analysts to examine whether India's dual approach (inclusive MILAN + selective QUAD) can be sustained as great power competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific.

INTRODUCTION

The 13th edition of **Exercise MILAN** at Visakhapatnam on February 20, 2026 — with 74 nations — is more than a naval exercise. It is a statement of strategic intent: India wants to be the **convener** of Indo-Pacific security, not merely a participant in someone else's architecture.

Yet this ambition sits in tension with India's parallel deepening of the **QUAD** — a more exclusive grouping perceived by China and some Global South nations as a containment arrangement. How India navigates this tension will define its maritime statecraft for the next decade.

INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC VISION: INCLUSIVE VS. SELECTIVE

India's official position on the Indo-Pacific is captured in PM Modi's **2018 Shangri-La Dialogue address**: the Indo-Pacific is "a free, open and prosperous region" that must not become a "domain of a few powers" or a "club of limited members."

This philosophy, rooted in **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region, 2015), positions India as a net security provider to the entire Indian Ocean Region — not just to like-minded democracies.

MILAN embodies this vision:

- Open to any country that values rules-based maritime order
- Includes non-aligned nations (African, Pacific Island, Caribbean states)
- Does not require shared political values or alliance commitments
- Builds India's soft power as a responsible maritime partner

QUAD represents a harder edge:

- Limited to India, USA, Japan, Australia
- Addresses specific strategic challenges (Chinese maritime assertiveness, supply chain security, critical technology)
- Includes vaccine diplomacy, submarine cable security, and cyber norms — beyond purely military interoperability

THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF MILAN

Building a Maritime Security Architecture

India has limited capacity to police the entire Indo-Pacific alone. MILAN creates a **network of partnerships** — navies that have trained together, established communication protocols, and built professional relationships. When a humanitarian crisis or piracy incident occurs, this network is activated.

Concrete benefits:

- HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief):** After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and 2013 Typhoon Hainan, navies that had interoperability from exercises like MILAN coordinated faster and more effectively
- Anti-piracy:** Gulf of Aden and Somali basin operations benefit from shared picture through IFC-IOR (Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region, Gurugram)
- Search and Rescue (SAR):** Standardised communication protocols from MILAN exercises enable multi-nation SAR operations

The Small States Dimension

Critically, MILAN includes **small island states and developing nations** — Pacific Island countries, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros. For these nations:

- India provides **coastal surveillance systems** (radar networks donated to Maldives, Seychelles, Sri Lanka)

Hydrographic surveys support navigation safety

Scholarships for naval officer training at INS Chilika and NDA

Disaster relief was India's first response to the 2021 Tonga volcanic eruption

This network of relationships is the foundation of India's "**Neighbourhood First**" policy extended to the maritime domain.

THE QUAD DILEMMA

QUAD creates a perception problem for India's inclusive maritime vision:

China's narrative: Beijing portrays QUAD as an "Asian NATO" — a containment ring. This narrative resonates in some African and ASEAN capitals, where countries prefer not to be forced to "choose sides."

Global South credibility: India's claim to leadership of the Global South is undermined if it is seen as a vehicle for US strategic interests.

Multilateral obligations: India's positions at the UN General Assembly, BRICS, and G20 emphasise multipolarity. Deep QUAD alignment creates cognitive dissonance.

India's Response: "Issue-Based" QUAD Framing

India has consistently framed QUAD in functional, non-threatening terms:

COVID vaccines (QUAD Vaccine Initiative)

Climate infrastructure (Clean Energy Supply Chain Initiative)

Cyber security standards

Semiconductor resilience

The explicit avoidance of QUAD becoming a mutual defence treaty preserves India's strategic flexibility. When asked whether QUAD would become a military alliance, India's former Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla said it is a "force for global good" — not a collective defence organisation.

SEA LINES OF COMMUNICATION — WHY THE INDO-PACIFIC MATTERS

~95% of India's international trade by volume moves through sea lanes. Key chokepoints that affect India's trade:

Chokepoint	Location	Daily Trade Volume
Malacca Strait	Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore	~80,000 vessels/year
Hormuz Strait	Iran-Oman	~20 million barrels oil/day
Bab-el-Mandeb	Yemen-Djibouti	~4.8 million barrels oil/day
Lombok Strait	Indonesia (alternate)	Bypass route

China’s **“String of Pearls”** strategy — establishing naval footholds in the IOR (Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu, Djibouti) — creates a potential threat to these chokepoints from India’s perspective.

MILAN, by building relationships with nations controlling access to these straits (Singapore controls Malacca; Oman overlooks Hormuz; Djibouti commands Bab-el-Mandeb), is India’s long-game response to this encirclement.

CONCLUSION

MILAN 2026’s record 74 nations demonstrates that India’s inclusive maritime strategy has appeal. But inclusion alone is not deterrence — and the Indo-Pacific’s strategic environment is hardening.

India’s challenge is to maintain MILAN’s legitimacy as an open platform while deepening QUAD’s capabilities without triggering the “bloc vs. bloc” dynamic it has spent decades avoiding. The answer likely lies in India’s traditional statecraft: **“strategic autonomy” not as fence-sitting, but as the freedom to shape outcomes without permanent dependencies.**

A 74-nation MILAN is a legitimate instrument of that strategy — building the broad-based trust that India needs to be taken seriously as a responsible maritime power.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Exercise MILAN — 13th edition, Visakhapatnam, 74 nations; SAGAR doctrine (2015); Eastern Naval Command; IFC-IOR (Gurugram, 2018); QUAD (India, USA, Japan, Australia). Mains GS-2: India’s Indo-Pacific strategy; multilateral naval diplomacy; QUAD vs. inclusive frameworks; strategic autonomy; Act East Policy; India as net security provider. GS-3: Sea lines of communication; chokepoints; China’s String of Pearls; India’s maritime trade interests. Interview: Is India’s dual-track approach (MILAN + QUAD) sustainable, or does it reflect strategic incoherence?

★ **FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA**

EXERCISE MILAN:

Founded: **1995**, Port Blair | 2026: 13th edition, Visakhapatnam, **74 nations**

Host: **Eastern Naval Command (ENC)**, Visakhapatnam

INDIA'S MARITIME DOCTRINES:

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

Act East Policy: Renamed from Look East (2014); ASEAN + Pacific focus

Net Security Provider: Declared by PM Manmohan Singh, Shangri-La 2007

QUAD:

Members: India, USA, Japan, Australia

Revived: **2017** (first formed 2007, dormant 2008-17)

Key initiatives: Vaccine Partnership, Clean Energy Supply Chain, Submarine Cable Security, Cyber Norms

CRITICAL CHOKEPOINTS (INDIA'S TRADE):

Malacca Strait: 80,000+ vessels/year; controlled by Singapore/Indonesia/Malaysia

Hormuz Strait: ~20 million bbl/day; Iran-Oman border

Bab-el-Mandeb: ~4.8 million bbl/day; Yemen-Djibouti

IFC-IOR:

Full name: Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region

Location: **Gurugram** | Launched: **2018**

Purpose: Real-time maritime domain awareness for IOR nations

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India's EEZ: **2.37 million sq km** | Coast length: **7,516 km**

China's String of Pearls: Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Djibouti port

UNCLOS (1982): Defines EEZ (200 nm), continental shelf; India ratified 1995

Sources: The Hindu, GKToday

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