



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

MARCH 2024

Author

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INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

This publication is a monthly analytical survey of developments and policy trends that impact India's interests and define its challenges across the extended Indo-Pacific maritime space, which has become the primary theatre of global geopolitical contestation. It is authored by Cmde. Lalit Kapur (Retd.), DPG Senior Fellow for Maritime Strategy, assisted by Ms. Divya Rai, based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to the author at lalit@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Image:

Indian and US Armed Forces Personnel at the Opening Ceremony of Exercise Tiger Triumph 2024 at Visakhapatnam, March 19, 2024. Source: US Indo-Pacific Command

EAM Dr S Jaishankar meets Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo, March 08, 2024. Source: Kantei.org

IN Ships Vikrant and Vikramaditya in formation during the Naval Commanders' Conference, March 05-08, 2024. Source: Indian Navy

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INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

March 2024

Abstract

Maritime order, towards India's west and east, remained in turmoil during the month. To the west, US and European operations to protect shipping in the Red Sea struggled to assure safety against Houthi strikes on merchant vessels. Traffic volumes through the Red Sea and Suez Canal plummeted, with ships choosing to take the longer route around Africa. MV Rubymar, a vessel that had been hit by an Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile on February 24, sank on the morning of March 02. Meanwhile, the Indian Navy carried out a landmark operation on March 16 to rescue MV Ruen from Somali pirates.

To India's East, tensions flared up in the South China Sea with Chinese naval assets acting aggressively, using water cannon and collisions to stop Philippines' resupply missions in the Second Thomas Shoal. Strong statements and warnings from the US, Japan and Australia did not have much impact. Further north, in the East China Sea, China declared that there is no median line in the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, USS John Finn carried out a Taiwan Strait transit on March 05.

China unveiled a defence budget of about \$ 231.67 billion on March 05. The amount is more than the annual defence budgets of India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and India combined. The US on its part announced a Presidential Budget Request of \$ 849.8 billion for FY 2025, substantially lower than the total of over \$ 900.3 billion appropriated for FY 2024.

Japan's ruling coalition agreed to revise Japan's strict defence export guidelines to allow sales of the GCAP fighter being developed jointly with the UK and Italy, albeit with certain conditions.

Two Royal Navy auxiliaries began essential repairs at the L&T Shipyard at Kattupalli under a defence cooperation agreement signed between India and the UK in January 2024.

The Third India-US Tiger Triumph tri-service exercise was held on India's eastern seaboard from March 18-31, 2024.



Warships from Russia, China and Iran came together for the third edition of Exercise Sea Security Belt in the Gulf of Oman from March 12-15, 2024.

Australia identified BAE Systems UK and ASC Australia as the shipbuilding partners for its AUKUS submarines. The latter was also identified as the maintenance partner. Australia and the UK also signed a revised defence and security cooperation agreement, envisaging much greater UK presence in the Indo-Pacific. This includes the deployment of a Carrier Strike Group to the region in 2025.

The Recapture of MV Ruen

MV Ruen, a Bulgaria-owned and Malta-flagged bulk carrier, left Gwangyang in South Korea on November 25, 2023, bound for the Turkish port of Gemlik in the Sea of Marmara with a cargo of 37,800 tons of steel. On December 14, the ship sent a Mayday message reporting that she had been boarded (and subsequently hijacked) by six unknown personnel. The vessel was located by the Indian Navy (IN) the next day and tracked thereafter¹. The IN succeeded in getting the hijackers to release an injured crewman for treatment. However, they reached the sanctuary of Somali waters before further action could be taken, forcing the IN to call off pursuit. Nevertheless, the IN maintained surveillance over the ship.

This surveillance paid off when information indicated that MV Ruen had forayed out of Somali waters and was headed into the Arabian Sea. Pirates have in the past used captured ships as mother vessels. This time, however, while the world watched, the IN acted. INS Kolkata was ordered to intercept and did so on March 15, 2024. She confirmed the presence armed pirates on board using a shipborne drone. The pirates shot down the drone and fired at INS Kolkata. In a carefully calibrated non-kinetic action, Kolkata disabled Ruen's steering system and nav aids, forcing her to stop². A team of marine commandos was flown over 2600 Km from India to the region by an IAF C-17, paraded into the water, and boarded the ship. All 35 Somali pirates on board surrendered on March 16, while the 17 original crew members (seven Bulgarian, nine from Myanmar and one from Angola) were released and safely evacuated from the vessel.

¹ Indian Navy's Mission Deployed Platforms Respond to Hijacking Incident in the Arabian Sea, December 16, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1987060>

² Anti-Piracy Operations Against Pirate Ship MV Ruen by Indian Navy, March 16, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/anti-piracy-operations-against-pirate-ship-mv-ruen-indian-navy>



The action happened just days after warships from China, Russia and Iran had collectively exercised the recapture of a hijacked vessel in the Gulf of Oman³. The difference lay in the fact that one was an exercise where the host navy's ships masqueraded as pirate vessels and played out a choreographed event! The other was the real thing.

The ship and her cargo have been brought to India. The pirates will stand trial under India's Maritime Anti-Piracy Act of 2022, which came into effect in February 2023⁴. This will be the first time pirates will be tried under the act.

Two months earlier, the Indian Navy had recaptured MV Lila Norfolk after a 24-hour long confrontation with pirates off the Somali coast. At that time, however, the ship's crew had been able to isolate themselves in the ship's citadel and were not hostages⁵. The pirates abandoned ship and escaped under the cover of darkness before being boarded.

The incident serves as proof of India's ability to deliver on its "first-responder" commitment and the ability to find innovative solutions to maritime security problems while minimising risk.

AUKUS Announcements

Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles announced that the Government had selected ASC Pty Ltd (formerly Australian Submarine Corporation) and BAE Systems as the build partners for Australia's SSN-AUKUS submarines⁶. The two companies will join hands to form a collaborative arrangement, leading to the establishment of an incorporated joint venture (JV) in Australia. ASC, established in 1985, has been the build and sustainment partner for Australia's Collins-class submarines, while BAE Systems is the UK's nuclear-submarine designer and build partner. The JV, when established, will be responsible for delivery of the SSN-AUKUS, as well as ensuring the safety, security and regulatory compliance throughout the build programme. Marles also announced that ASC would be the Government's sustainment partner for

³ Maritime Phase of Security Bond – 2024 joint naval drills concludes, March 14, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16294025.html

⁴ The Maritime Anti-Piracy Act, 2022, No. 3 of 2023, https://prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/acts_parliament/2023/The%20Maritime%20Anti%20piracy%20Act.%202022.pdf

⁵ Indian Navy Retakes Merchant Ship From Armed Hijackers in the Arabian Sea, January 7, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/07/indian-navy-retakes-merchant-ship-from-armed-hijackers-in-the-arabian-sea>

⁶ AUKUS build and sustainment partners announced. March 22, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2024-03-22/aukus-build-and-sustainment-partners-announced>



nuclear submarines, starting with the Virginia-class and followed by SSN-AUKUS.

AUKUS Defence Ministers welcomed the announcement in a trilateral statement⁷. Noting that the SSN_AUKUS “will be equipped for intelligence, surveillance, undersea warfare and strike missions and will provide maximum interoperability among AUKUS partners”, the statement recorded that the optimal pathway was “always designed to create a stronger, more resilient trilateral submarine industrial base, supporting submarine production and maintenance in all three countries”. It went on to highlight that Australia had agreed to an AUD\$1.5 billion investment for early priority works at HMAS Stirling, and at least AUD\$18 billion in infrastructure upgrades across South and Western Australia over the next ten years. The US had earlier announced the intent to invest USD\$11.4 billion in its submarine industrial base across the five-year Défense budget period starting in 2025. UK has announced that it will inject £3 billion into its Defence Nuclear Enterprise, including the construction of submarine industrial infrastructure. Rolls-Royce has announced that it will double the size of its Derby site to support delivery of the UK and Australian programmes, including building all of Australia’s nuclear reactors⁸.

Australia’s Richard Marles further announced that key land acquisition and infrastructure upgrades had already commenced to enable commencement of construction of SSN-AUKUS before the end of the decade. Work had also begun to develop the skills to maintain SSNs, with increased visits of US and UK SSNs to Australia. The establishment of the Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Regulator, with a legislation currently before Australian Parliament, will be another important milestone.

The SSN-AUKUS undertaking will lead to the creation of around 20,000 jobs in Australia, he said. It will result in more robust and resilient supply chains for the AUKUS partners. A Defence Industry Vendor Qualification Programme has already been launched, working with 26 companies across four product families to qualify suppliers into both the US and UK supply chains commencing mid-2024⁹. In parallel, pilot programmes to develop Australia’s workforce to build and sustain the SSNs had begun, including short-term

⁷ AUKUS Trilateral Statement, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3714709/aukus-trilateral-statement/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Australian industry and jobs front and centre of AUKUS submarines, March 22, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2024-03-22/australian-industry-and-jobs-front-and-centre-aukus-submarines>



placements in the US to enabled an understanding of AUKUS trilateral training requirements and methods.

During subsequent press interaction, Marles stated that Australia would be giving the UK \$4.6 billion to expand the Rolls Royce nuclear reactor construction facility at Derby¹⁰, in UK (reactors for Australia's SSN-AUKUS are to be built exclusively in the UK). He also noted that the US draft budget has put \$ 11 billion into strengthening the US submarine building industrial base, in addition to the \$ 3 billion put in last year and the \$ 3 billion provided by Australia¹¹. Australia was putting A\$ 30 billion into building the requisite industrial base facilities in Australia.

The announcement regarding selection of build and sustainment partners is a significant step forward in Australia's SSN programme. In reality, it should be seen as a statement of intent: the terms and shareholding pattern of the JV are yet to be decided. There has been progress, but the sunk cost is not yet so high as to become a significant factor in future decisions. That there is still substantial scepticism about whether Australia will ever get SSNs comes out from the questions asked of the defence minister during various press interactions following his announcement.

USN Force Structure

"It shall be the policy of the United States to have available, as soon as practicable, not fewer than 355 battle force ships, comprised of the optimal mix of platforms, with funding subject to the availability of appropriations or other funds", reads Section 1025 of the National Defense Authorisation Act for FY 2018¹². Six years after this policy statement became law, the USN has fallen even further behind in making up shortfalls to reach the 355-ship goal. At present, it has 293 ships¹³. Meanwhile, the USN and Department of the Navy

¹⁰ Radio Interview, ABC Radio National, March 22, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2024-03-22/radio-interview-abc-radio-national>

¹¹ Television Interview, Sky News, March 22, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2024-03-22/television-interview-sky-news-0>

¹² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2025, March 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ91/PLAW-115publ91.pdf>

¹³ CRS Report IF 10486 – Defense Primer: Naval Forces, March 25, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10486>

have proposed a 381 ship Navy to Congress¹⁴. Congress is yet to consider this force level.

| Ship Type | 355 Ship Goal | BFSAR Report ¹⁵ | Strength | | |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
| | | | 2025 | 2030 | 2040 |
| SSBN | 12 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 13 |
| SSN | 66 | 66 | 49 | 47 | 57 |
| CVN | 12 | 12 | 12 | 11 | 11 |
| CG and DDG | 104 | 87 | 83 | 81 | 84-86 ¹⁶ |
| FFG, LCS and smaller ships | 52 | 73 | 30 | 31 | 46-55 |
| Amphibious Ships | 38 | 31 | 31 | 31 | 31 |
| Resupply Ships | 32 | 46 | 32 | 33 | 41-56 |
| Command & Support Ships | 39 | 54 | 32 | 48 | 64-67 |
| Total | 355 | 381 | 287 | 294 | 346-378 |

Table 1: US Navy Fleet Strength¹⁷

The Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2025¹⁸, published earlier this month, provides authoritative figures of the present and future size of the US Navy, based on the inventory of battle force ships. Battle Force Ships are commissioned US Navy warships that are capable of contributing directly to combat or support operations. They broadly comprise nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), nuclear attack submarines (SSN), nuclear-powered aircraft carriers (CVN), Large surface combatants (cruisers and destroyers, CG or DDG), small surface combatants (FFG or LCS), amphibious ships, combat logistics force ships, and command and support ships. A summary of force level projections under the report is at Table 1 above.

¹⁴ Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2025, March 2024, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24487775/rtc-pb25-shipbuilding_plan.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The lower figure represents force level in the event of constrained budgets.

¹⁷ CRS Report RL 32665- Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress, March 01, 2024.

¹⁸ Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2025, March 2024, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24487775/rtc-pb25-shipbuilding_plan.pdf



The following come out from the table:

- With a strength of 49 boats, the USN is 17 SSNs below the approved force level as of now. This strength will sink further to 47 boats by 2030. Maintenance backlogs have ensured that not more than 60% of the strength is available for operational deployment at any one time; the balance are undergoing maintenance. The USN plans to invest \$ 17.5 billion in submarine building infrastructure over the next five years to enable the annual production of one Columbia-class SSBN and two Virginia-class SSNs. Additional funds will be required to enable the production and delivery of SSNs to Australia: one in service boat each in FY 32 and FY 35, one new boat in FY 38. The USN force level of SSNs will at best reach 57 boats by 2040.
- In terms of large surface combatants, the USN is 17 ships below the approved policy goal. If, however, the new distributed fleet architecture proposed by the USN in 2024 is considered, the present strength is nearly at the requisite level.
- In small surface combatants, the USN is 22 ships below the policy goal of 2018. It is at less than half the force level proposed by the distributed fleet architecture of 2024.
- The distributed fleet architecture of 2024 requires larger numbers of resupply and command and support ships in future years. These will have to be built. The US shipbuilding infrastructure base lacks the requisite capacity.
- If the constrained budget environment prevalent today persists, the USN will remain substantially short of its goal even in 2040.

While the US Navy will continue to shrink for the remaining part of this decade, the PLA (Navy) continues its unprecedented growth. Its ships are newer, more easily maintainable, and operate much closer to the homeland. Prolonged deployments of USN warships across the world and limitations of the industrial support base are resulting in maintenance shortfalls. Is the USN in a position to support conflict in a distant theatre, or to fight in two different fronts (Europe and Asia)? The answer is no longer beyond doubt.



The Tale Two Budget Proposals Tell

The Chinese and US governments both notified their defence budgets this month, China for FY 2024, and the US for FY 2025 (the budget for FY 2024 was enacted via NDAA 2024 and the appropriation bill signed into law on March 23, 2024¹⁹).

China unveiled a defence budget of CNY 1.66554 trillion (about \$ 231.36 billion) to the National People's Congress on March 05²⁰. It increased projected expenditure by 7.2% over the 2023 budget of CNY 1.55 trillion; the growth rate was maintained at last year's level, even though IMF estimates are that the Chinese economy is slowing and will expand by only around 4.8% in 2024²¹.

China does not publish a breakdown of the different heads under which money will be spent. Moreover, the budget does not account for some military research and development, military aspects of China's space programme, defence mobilisation funds, recruitment bonuses for students, provincial military base operating costs, military pensions, spending on paramilitary forces²², etc. That, coupled with the different purchasing power, had led the US to assess that China's actual military spending may be as much as four times the public announcement²³. Media reports based on classified recent US intelligence estimates indicate that China's actual defence spend could be as much as \$ 700 billion²⁴, or more than three times the published figure.

The annual expenditure of Asia's largest defence spenders in 2022 is at Table 2 below. It may be seen that China's published defence expenditure is more than the next five Asian countries combined. Notably, all these countries see China as a potential adversary. China's growing defence spend, aggressive and assertive behaviour and lack of transparency has resulted in growing military expenditure through Asia, notwithstanding economic difficulties created by the pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

¹⁹ Press Release: Bill Signed – HR 2882, March 23, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2024/03/23/press-release-bill-signed-h-r-2882/>

²⁰ China raises defense budget by 7.2% for 2024, "conducive to peace, stability", Global Times, March 05, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308188.shtml>

²¹ Based on Data from IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2023.

²² "What Does China Really Spend on its Military?", <https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>

²³ Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2002/d20020712china.pdf>

²⁴ Mackenzie Eaglen, "Setting the record straight on Beijing's actual military spending", August 08, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/setting-the-record-straight-on-beijings-actual-military-spending/>

| Sl | Country | Defence Budget 2023 (\$ billion) |
|----|-------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | China (PRC) | 219.46 |
| 2 | India | 73.58 |
| 3 | Japan | 49.04 |
| 4 | South Korea | 43.84 |
| 5 | Australia | 34.42 |
| 6 | Taiwan | 18.89 |
| 7 | Singapore | 13.40 |
| 8 | Pakistan | 11.06 |
| 9 | Indonesia | 8.80 |
| 10 | Vietnam | 7.40 |
| 11 | Philippines | 6.22 |
| 12 | Thailand | 5.68 |

Table 2: Asia's Defence Spending in 2023²⁵.
 (Only countries with budgets above \$ 5 billion included)

The US Presidential Budget Request was submitted to the House on March 12, 2024. The Department of Défense has requested \$ 849.8 billion for FY 2025²⁶, as against FY 2023 actuals of \$ 851.7 billion (base \$ 815.9 billion, supplementals \$ 35.8 billion) and FY 2024 total of \$ 900.3 billion (\$ 842 billion as passed by NDAA 2024, \$ 58.3 billion supplementals). However, as the overall Appropriations Bill was not passed at the time of publication, the DoD assumed working under a Continuing Resolution, which limits spending to \$ 817.3 billion²⁷.

The request, in the words of the Secretary of Défense, "advances a strategy focused on China and seeking to prevent the PRC's dominance of key regions while protecting the US homeland and reinforcing a stable and open international system"²⁸. A vital objective is to dissuade the PRC from considering aggression as a viable means of advancing goals that threaten vital US national interests. The request reiterates that conflict with the PRC is

²⁵ Sourced from IISS The Military Balance 2024.

²⁶ United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf

²⁷ The bill was signed into law on March 23, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2024/03/23/press-release-bill-signed-h-r-2882/>. However, the supplemental bill still remains pending at the time of writing.

²⁸ Central Premise of the Budget, United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf



neither inevitable nor desirable. It seeks to support whole-of-government efforts to develop terms of interaction that are favourable to US and allied interests while managing strategic competition and enabling cooperation on shared challenges. Other threats identified by the DoD are Russia, North Korea, Iran and violent extremist organisations.

The breakdown of proposed expenditure is \$ 185.807 billion for the Army, \$ 257.586 billion for the Navy, \$ 262.642 billion for the Air Force, and \$ 143.735 billion for 'Défense-wide' expenditure²⁹. The key investments proposed are:

- Integrated Deterrence
 - \$ 49.2 billion for nuclear enterprise modernisation, including \$ 9.9 billion for the Columbia class SSBN, \$ 5.3 billion for the B-21 bomber, \$3.7 billion for the Sentinel ground-based deterrent, and \$ 0.8 billion for the Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) Weapon.
 - \$ 28.4 billion for missile defeat and Défense to protect the homeland and allies.
 - \$ 9.8 billion for offensive Long-Range Fires within the Future Years Defense Program.
 - \$ 61.8 billion for Air Power investments. These include 68 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, (down from 83 in FY 2024); 19 F-15EX, 15 KC-46A Tankers, 19 CH-53K King Stallion Helicopters, 31 Apache helicopters, 24 Black Hawk helicopters, three Stingray UAVs,
 - \$ 48.1 billion for Sea Power investments, including one Virginia class submarine, two Arleigh Burke class destroyers, one Constellation class FFG, one San Antonio class amphibious warfare ship, and one Medium Landing Ship. Incremental funding is provided for the next three Ford class carriers and other ships.
 - \$ 13.0 billion to modernise Army and Marine Corps combat equipment.
 - \$ 33.7 billion in vital space capabilities, resilient architectures and enhanced space command and control.
 - \$ 14.5 billion for cyberspace activities.

- Campaigning
 - \$ 147.5 billion for strategic readiness and preparedness of the Joint Force
 - \$ 9.9 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative,
 - \$ 3.9 billion for European deterrence and countering Russian aggression.

²⁹ United States Department of Defence, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request, Op Cit.



- \$ 300 million for Ukraine security assistance.
- Building Enduring Advantages.
 - \$ 143.2 billion for Research, Development, Testing and Evaluation.
 - \$ 17.2 billion for Science and Technology including \$ 2.5 billion for basic research.
 - \$ 37.3 billion in facilities investment
- People.
 - A 4.5% pay raise for military personnel and 2.0% for civilian personnel.
 - \$ 61.4 billion in military healthcare and \$ 10.6 billion in military family support programs.

34% of the USN's budget goes towards operations and maintenance, 30% is for procurement, 24% for personnel, 10% for R&D and 2% for construction of facilities. The construction budget includes funds for four naval shipyards and for replacing old infrastructure.

The proposal is consistent with mandatory caps imposed by the Congress under the Fiscal Year Responsibility Act of 2023³⁰, and thus grows by only \$7.8 billion over the FY 2024 budget request. Notably, there is a sharp drop of over \$ 4 billion in proposed overseas operation and maintenance costs³¹. This would be consistent with a US pullback from deployments abroad, if passed.

Comparing the amounts proposed does not provide a realistic indicator of what China and the US spend on 'defence and security'. China's figures are not reliable, the breakdown of expenditure is unknown, the purchasing power of the amounts proposed is different, and in any case, China acquires military capability from a number of non-military heads of its budget. Nevertheless, China's proposal to the National People's Congress reflects the figures it will spend under the published heads in FY 2024 reasonably accurately. The amounts are not going to be changed by the People's Congress. The US proposal, on the other hand, is for 2025 and reflects the administration's negotiating position at the beginning of a long process that will probably see

³⁰ Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ5/PLAW-118publ5.pdf>

³¹ Department of Defense Budget, Overseas Operations Costs Appendix, Fiscal Year 2025, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_m1_ooc.pdf



NDAA 2025 being approved, with substantial change, towards the end of this year. The amount will almost certainly increase, and substantially at that.

The rate of growth of the US budget is not commensurate with the multiple global responsibilities it has assumed. In the words of the Secretary of Defense, the "budget request reflects targeted reductions to programs that will deliver key capabilities in later years to support the joint force's ability to fight and win in the near term"³². In effect, the focus has shifted from building platforms and rejuvenating ageing systems, particularly in the Navy and Air Force, to strengthening overall capability required to fight in the near term, pushing the responsibility for rejuvenation to subsequent administrations. So, whereas China's budget tells a tale of purposeful movement towards its objectives, the US budget speaks of an understanding of the geopolitical situation, but passing off the responsibility of providing resources to deal with it to future administrations.

Exercise Tiger Triumph

Among the outcomes of the inaugural India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was the two sides committing "to the creation of a new, tri-services exercise and to further increase personnel exchanges between the two militaries and defense organizations"³³. A year later, speaking to the Indian community in Houston, US President Donald Trump announced³⁴, "In November, the United States and India will demonstrate a dramatic progress of our defense relationship, holding the first-ever tri-service military exercise between our nations". It's called "Tiger Triumph", he added. The first exercise took place from November 13-21, 2019, at Visakhapatnam and off Kakinada³⁵.

³² Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the President's Fiscal year 2025, budget, United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf

³³ Extract from "Joint Statement on the Inaugural India-U.S 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue", September 06, 2018, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30358/Joint_Statement_on_the_Inaugural_IndiaUS_2432_Ministerial_Dialogue

³⁴ Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India at "Howdy, Modi: Shared Dreams, Bright Futures: Event, September 22, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-modi-india-howdy-modi-shared-dreams-bright-futures-event/>

³⁵ U.S., India Launch First Tiger Triumph Exercise, November 15, 2019, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2018116/us-india-launch-first-tiger-triumph-exercise/>



The third edition of the exercise took place at on the Eastern Seaboard of India from March 18-31³⁶, with an opening ceremony on board INS Jalashwa on September 19³⁷. Participating units from India included the sole Landing Platform Dock INS Jalashwa (ex-USS Trenton), Large Landing Ships (Tank) with their integral Landing Craft and helicopters, a missile frigate, long range maritime patrol aircraft, an infantry battalion including mechanised forces, medium lift aircraft, transport helicopters and Special Operations Forces from all three services. US participants included the LPD USS Somerset with its integral Landing Craft Air Cushion and helicopters, the Destroyer USS Halsey, P-8A Poseidon Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft, US Army and Air Force assets, and a contingent of US Marines³⁸.

The current year's exercise is the largest ever, focusing on "advancing large-scale joint and combined interoperability for HADR operations"³⁹. A harbour phase, from March 18-27, provided opportunity for Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE), bilateral interaction, sports and cultural familiarisation. The sea phase, commencing March 28, provided opportunity for rehearsal of insertion of personnel across a beach⁴⁰.

Amphibious operations, involving entering another country across an unprepared beach (and not a port or an airport) are among the most complex of military operations. The basic steps remain the same, whether they are conducted for HADR or for creating strategic surprise: the only major difference comes in if the landing is opposed. The US Armed Forces had become the world's foremost exponents of opposed beach landings during World War II. The biennial Tiger Triumph exercise provides both sides an opportunity to learn from each other, while developing the interoperability and familiarisation that are such an essential part of Combined Operations.

³⁶ Ex Tiger Triumph – 24, March 18, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2015397>

³⁷ Ex Tiger Triumph – 24, March 19, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2015581>

³⁸ U.S., India launch Exercise Tiger Triumph 2024, March 21, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3714876/us-india-launch-exercise-tiger-triumph-2024/>

³⁹ 15th MEU, USS Somerset Arrive for Third Iteration of Tiger Triumph, March 25, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3718229/15th-meu-uss-somerset-arrive-for-third-iteration-of-tiger-triumph/>

⁴⁰ Sea Phase of Exercise Tiger Triumph 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/sea-phase-exercise-tiger-triumph-2024>



Operations, Exercises and Capability Enhancement - India

Fuel Loading at India's Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor⁴¹. Prime Minister Narendra Modi witnessed the commencement of core loading at the indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor at Kalpakkam on March 04, 2024. Once commissioned, India will become the second country after Russia to have a commercially operating Fast Breeder Reactor. It, along with other similar reactors, will comprise Stage II of India's ambitious three-stage nuclear power programme, which is intended to utilise plentiful supplies of Thorium in India to generate power and make India energy-independent.

Agni-V Flight Test⁴². Mission Divyastra, the maiden flight test of the Agni-V missile with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-Entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology, was successfully conducted from the Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Island on March 11. The mission was adjudged 'successful'. The test marks a significant accretion to India's nuclear deterrent capability.

INS Kolkata Assists Liberian Container Carrier. MSC Sky II, a Liberian-flagged container carrier, was hit by a Houthi missile in the Gulf of Aden on the evening of March 04. INS Kolkata responded to a call for assistance and escorted the vessel to Djibouti⁴³. A report by US CENTCOM indicated that the container vessel had been struck by an Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM)⁴⁴. A bulk carrier, MV True Confidence, was also hit by an ASBM two days later, with significant damage to the ship forcing the crew to abandon it⁴⁵.

Op Sankalp⁴⁶. Mar 23, 2024 marked the 100th day of Op Sankalp, the maritime security operation launched by the Indian Navy in response to the increased threat to maritime security in the Red Sea. The area of operations is the Gulf of Aden and adjoining areas, the Arabian Sea and off the East Coast of Somalia. During this period, the IN has responded to 18 incidents, saved over 110 lives,

⁴¹ PM witnesses historic "Commencement of Core Loading" at India first indigenous Fast Breeder Reactor (500 Mwe) at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, March 04, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2011347>

⁴² DRDO successfully conducts Mission Divyastra, March 11, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2013549>

⁴³ Indian Navy Provided Assistance to Liberian-Flagged Container Vessel, MSC Sky II, March 06, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-provided-assistance-liberian-flagged-container-vessel-msc-sky-ii>

⁴⁴ Houthis Kill Innocent Civilians with Missile Attack, March 6, 2024, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3698591/houthis-kill-innocent-civilians-with-missile-attack/>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Indian Navy's Ongoing Maritime Security Operations (Op Sankalp) 14 Dec 23 to 23 Mar 24, March 23, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2016201>



conducted nearly 1000 boarding operations, seized more than 3000 Kg of narcotics and provided reassurance to over 450 vessels.

ICG Apprehends Pakistani Boat with Narcotics⁴⁷. An overnight joint operation near Porbandar resulted in the apprehension of a Pakistani boat attempting to smuggle 80 Kg of narcotics, worth about Rs 480 crores, into India. This is the tenth such apprehension in the last three years.

Ex Cutlass Express. INS Tir represented the Indian Navy in multinational Exercise Cutlass Express-24 at Port Victoria, Seychelles, from February 26 – March 08⁴⁸. The exercise was inaugurated by Wavel Ramkalawan, President of Seychelles and included participants from 16 friendly foreign countries. The IN has been participating in this exercise since 2019.

Exercise Samudra Laksmana⁴⁹. India and Malaysia participated in the third edition of bilateral exercise Samudra Laksmana off Visakhapatnam from February 28 – March 2, 2024. The exercise included a harbour phase, with Subject Matter Expert Exchanges and other professional interactions, and a sea phase including firing, seamanship evolutions, helicopter operations and other exercises.

Exercise LAMITIYE-2024⁵⁰. A 45-man contingent of the Indian Army's Gorkha Rifles participated in the tenth edition of Exercise LAMITIYE-2024 in the Seychelles from March 18-27. The exercise is intended to enhance interoperability in sub-conventional operations in a semi-urban environment under Chapter VII of the UN Charter on Peacekeeping Operations.

Exercise IMT TRILAT 2024⁵¹. IN Ships Tir and Sujata participated in the second edition of Exercise IMT TRILAT with Mozambique and Tanzania. The exercise was conducted in two phases: a harbour phase from 21-24 March, followed by a sea phase from 24-28 March.

USCGS Bertholf in Port Blair. US Coast Guard Ship Bertholf was in Port Blair for Joint Exercise Sea Defenders 2024 with the Indian Coast Guard on March 08 &

⁴⁷ In a joint operation, Indian Coast Guard apprehends Pakistani Boat in Arabian Sea near Porbandar, March 12, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2013835>

⁴⁸ First Training Squadron Participates in Cutlass Express 2024, March 10, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2013170>

⁴⁹ India Malaysia Bilateral Maritime Exercise Samudra Laksmana, March 01, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2010643>

⁵⁰ Indian Army Contingent Departs for Seychelles for Joint Military Exercise LAMITIYE-2024, March 17, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2015283>

⁵¹ India-Mozambique-Tanzania Trilateral Exercise IMT TRILAT-2024, March 21, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2015968>



09⁵². The US cutter arrived Port Blair on March 07 and departed on March 19⁵³. She is the first USCG ship to visit Port Blair.

Luftwaffe to Participate in India's Large Scale Air Exercise⁵⁴. Media reports indicate that Germany has planned a military deployment by its air force to participate in the Indian Air Force large scale multi-nation military exercise in Southern India in August. The German contingent for the exercise will include fighter aircraft, tankers and transports. Aircraft from France, Spain and the UK are also expected to participate in the exercise.

INS Tir and CGS Sarathi Visit Port Louis⁵⁵. Ships of the First Training Squadron, comprising INS Tir and CGS Sarathi, visited Port Louis, Mauritius, as part of their long-range deployment. The visit coincided with the 57th Mauritius National Day celebration, at which the President, Smt Droupadi Murmu, was the Chief Guest.

INSV Tarini In Mauritius⁵⁶. INSV Tarini arrived in Mauritius on March 21, after a 22-day voyage from Goa. The sailing vessel has a crew of two lady officers preparing for the forthcoming sailing expedition by an all-woman crew around the globe, commencing in September. The vessel is to commence her return journey to Kochi on March 30.

CGS Samudra Paheredar Visits Manila⁵⁷. a specialised pollution control vessel, arrived Manila to coincide with the visit of the External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to the Philippines. The visit is intended to demonstrate the ICG's marine pollution response capabilities, and foster cooperation with the Philippine Coast Guard. The ship will thereafter visit Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Muara Port, Brunei as part of India's maritime outreach to ASEAN.

⁵² US Coast Guard Ship Bertholf visits Port Blair for the joint exercise "Sea Defenders-2024" with Indian Coast Guard, March 07, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2012268>

⁵³ US Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf depart Port Blair, India, conducts exercise with Indian Coast Guard, March 19, 2024, <https://in.usembassy.gov/u-s-coast-guard-cutter-bertholf-departs-port-blair-india-conducts-exercise-with-indian-coast-guard/>

⁵⁴ Germany plans 'never before' military deployment to India to boost Indo-Pacific engagement, March 07, 2024, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/germany-plans-never-before-military-deployment-to-india-to-boost-indo-pacific-engagement/cid/2005282>

⁵⁵ First Training Squadron Enhances Bilateral Relations During Visit to Port Louis, March 15, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2014913>

⁵⁶ INSV Tarini Entered Port Louis, Mauritius, After 22 Days of Sortie, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/insv-tarini-entered-port-louis-mauritius-after-22-days-sortie>

⁵⁷ ICG Ship Samudra Paheredar arrives Manila Bay, Philippines, March 26, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2016346>

INAS 334 Commissioned⁵⁸. India's first squadron of US MH 60R helicopters, INAS 334, was commissioned at INS Garuda, Kochi, on March 06, 2024. The helicopter has folding main rotor blades and a hinged tail to reduce its footprint on board ships. India had contracted for 24 MH 60R helicopters in February 2020. The first two were handed over to the IN in San Diego in July 2021. The helicopters have already been integrated on INS Vikrant and were deployed during Ex Milan 2024.

INS Jatayu Commissioned⁵⁹. INS Jatayu, the Indian Naval station on Minicoy Island, was commissioned on March 06, 2024. The base strengthens IN ability to provide sustenance in the region, while extending its reach. It is the second IN base in the L&M islands, after INS Dweeprakshak at Kavaratti. A Maritime Operations Centre was also inaugurated at Minicoy Island the same day.

Acquisition Contracts⁶⁰. India's Ministry of Defence signed acquisition contracts worth over ₹39,125 crores (about \$ 4.7 billion) to procure RD-33 Aero Engines from HAL (₹ 5249.72 crores); Close In Weapon Systems (CIWS) from L&T (₹7668.82 crores); long-range high-power radars from L&T (₹ 5700.13 crores); missiles for the IN from Brahmos Aerospace (₹19,518.6 crores) and the Brahmos Ship-borne System from Brahmos Aerospace (₹988.07 crores).

Acquisition of Helicopters⁶¹. The Ministry of Defence signed contracts worth Rs 8073 crores with HAL on March 13 for the acquisition of 34 Advanced Light Helicopters Dhruv Mk III; 25 for the Army and nine for the Indian Coast Guard.

Launch of Agray and Akshay⁶². Agray and Akshay, the 5th and 6th ships of the eight ASW Shallow Water Craft being built by GRSE for the Indian Navy were launched on March 13, 2024 at GRSE Kolkata. The first ship of the class is due for delivery in mid-2024.

⁵⁸ Commissioning Ceremony of INAS 334 'Seahawks', March 06, 2024,

<https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/commissioning-ceremony-inas-334-seahawks>

⁵⁹ Indian Navy Commissions INS Jatayu at Minicoy, Strengthening Foothold in Lakshadweep Island, March 06, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-commissions-ins-jatayu-minicoy-strengthening-foothold-lakshadweep-island>

⁶⁰ Ministry of Defence signs five major capital acquisition contracts worth Rs 39, 125.39 crores, March 01, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2010528>

⁶¹ MoD signs contracts worth Rs 8073 Cr with HAL for acquisition of 34 Advanced Light Helicopters, (ALH) Dhruv Mk III for Indian Army and Indian Coast Guard, March 13, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2014340>

⁶² Launch of Agray and Akshay Fifth and Sixth Ship of ASW SWC (GRSE) Project, March 13, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2014425>

Mid-Life Upgrade of Dornier Aircraft⁶³. The Ministry of Defence signed a contract for the mid-life upgrade of 25 Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy at a cost of Rs 2,890 crores. The upgrade will include the fitment of state-of-the-art avionics and primary role sensors.

Other Indo-Pacific Developments

Biden Meloni Meeting⁶⁴. President Giorgia Meloni of Italy met US President Joe Biden at the White House on March 01. The leaders discussed security and stability in the Red Sea and trans-Atlantic coordination in the Indo-Pacific, among other subjects.

Australia ASEAN Special Summit⁶⁵. The Special Australia – ASEAN Summit to commemorate 50 years of Australia-ASEAN Dialogue Relations took place at Melbourne on March 06. It was preceded by a meeting of the Foreign Ministers.

EAM Visits Abroad. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited South Korea from March 05-06⁶⁶, Japan from March 07-09⁶⁷, Singapore from March 23-25⁶⁸, the Philippines from March 25-27⁶⁹, and Malaysia on March 28⁷⁰. In South Korea, he co-chaired the 10th India-ROK Joint Commission Meeting with his counterpart, interacted with Korean dignitaries and delivered a speech at

⁶³ MoD signs contract worth over Rs 2,890 cr with HAL for Mid Life Upgrade of 25 Dornier Aircraft of Indian Navy, March 15, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2015025>

⁶⁴ President Meloni meets with President Biden in Washington, March 01, 2024, <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-meets-president-biden-washington/25132>

⁶⁵ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The Australia-ASEAN Golden Jubilee Summit", https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/australia-asean-golden-jubilee-summit-5110.pdf

⁶⁶ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to the Republic of Korea, March 05-06, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37680/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_the_Republic_of_Korea_March_0506_2024

⁶⁷ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to Japan, (March 07-09, 2024), https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37693/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_Japan_March_0709_2024

⁶⁸ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to the Republic of Singapore (March (23-25), https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37744/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_the_Republic_of_Singapore_March_2325_2024

⁶⁹ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to Philippines (March (25-27), https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37755/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_Philippines_March_2527_2024

⁷⁰ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to Malaysia (March (27-28), https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37754/Visit_of_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_Malaysia_March_2728_2024



the Korea National Diplomatic Academy. In Japan, he met the Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, his counterpart MS Yoko Kamikawa, senior political leaders, a wide cross-section of the public and spoke at the Nikkie Forum on India-Japan partnership. In Singapore, he met the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, the Coordinating Minister for National Security, his counterpart, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Trade and Industry. In the Philippines, he called on the Philippines' President, held discussions with his counterpart Mr. Enrique A. Manalo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, met the Secretary of National Defense Mr. Gilbert Teodoro, and addressed senior officials of the Philippine Government, members of the Philippine Defence Forces and members of the Indian community on board CGS Samudra Paheredar. In Malaysia, he paid a courtesy call on the Prime Minister, met his counterpart, and held round-table meetings with CEOs and leaders of industry. All countries visited are important partners in India's Act East Policy.

AUKMIN 2024⁷¹. The Foreign and Defence Ministers of Australia and the UK met in Adelaide on March 22, 2024. They welcomed the UK's strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific, as well as their shared commitment to support openness, stability and prosperity in the region. They underscored the vital importance of the maritime domain for this commitment and called on all nations to adhere to UNCLOS and respect freedom of navigation. They reiterated their strong opposition to any coercive or destabilizing activities in the South China Sea, including the recent unsafe and destabilising behaviour by China's vessels against Philippine vessels and crew near the Second Thomas Shoal, and reiterated that the Arbitral Tribunal's award was final and binding. They signed an updated Agreement for Defence and Security Cooperation between the two countries, which adds, inter alia, a status of forces agreement; a clause codifying the practice of consulting on issues affecting sovereignty and strategic stability; the agreement to review all sub-treaty level agreements to align them with the new defence and security cooperation agreement. They reaffirmed their commitment to the AUKUS partnership and the importance of their ongoing engagement with other Indo-Pacific partners. They welcomed steps to enhance UK presence in the region, including the UK Carrier Strike Group's 2025 Indo-Pacific deployment and participation in Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025. They agreed to closer cooperation on undersea warfare, including establishing a bilateral theatre undersea warfare series, and to enhance cooperation on amphibious and littoral manoeuvre, including through Royal Commando participation in Exercise Predator's Run 2024. They agreed to

⁷¹ Joint Statement on Australia-UK Ministerial Consultations (AUKMIN) 2024, March 22, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-03-22/joint-statement-australia-uk-ministerial-consultations-aukmin-2024>



collaborate on capability concepts and requirements as both Australia and the UK look to replace their current fleets of destroyers, and to continue collaboration on the development and introduction into service of the UK's Type 26 frigate and Australia's Hunter-class frigates. They also agreed that the UK would contribute to the Combined Intelligence Centre-Australia within Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation.

Export of GCAP Fighters⁷². Japan's ruling coalition, comprising the LDP and Komeito, agreed to revise Japan's strict defence export guidelines to allow sales of the GCAP fighter aircraft jointly being developed by Italy, Japan and the UK to countries that have signed defence technology transfer deals with Japan, while excluding those directly involved in conflicts. India will be among the approved countries.

China Removes Duties Imposed on Australian Wine⁷³. Australia announced that it had been notified that effective March 29, China would remove its duties on Australian bottled wine. Consequently, Australia said it would discontinue its legal proceedings at the WTO. China had earlier removed duties on Australian barley. The action marks another step in normalisation of Australia – China trade relations.

Taiwan Strait. China's Defence Ministry spokesperson said that the PLA would strengthen military training in the Taiwan Straits to defend national sovereignty. Responding to accusations of PLA aircraft flying across the mid-line in the Taiwan Strait, he said there is no such line⁷⁴. The theoretical medial line was defined down the middle of the Strait by USAF General Benjamin Davis in 1955 and has remained a tacit understanding since then, though China has never recognized it. Taiwan, on the other hand, provided coordinates for this median line in 2019.

USS John Finn Transits Taiwan Strait. USS John Finn, an Arleigh Burke-class USN Destroyer, transited the Taiwan Strait from South to North on March 5, remaining outside the Territorial Sea of both China and Taiwan⁷⁵. The PLA Eastern Theatre Command spokesperson decried the transit, noting that the

⁷² Japan's ruling coalition approves export of future joint fighter jet, March 15, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/03/15/japan/fighter-jet-export-approval/>

⁷³ Resolution of wine dispute with China, March 28, 2024, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/resolution-wine-dispute-china>

⁷⁴ China says no 'mid-line' in Taiwan Straits, February 29, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16289819.html

⁷⁵ 7th Fleet Destroyer transits Taiwan Strait, March 5, 2024, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3694773/7th-fleet-destroyer-transits-taiwan-strait/>



PLA had organised air and naval forces to track and monitor the US destroyer throughout the transit⁷⁶.

South China Sea. Claiming that the Philippines has teamed up with countries from outside the region to stir trouble in the South China Sea thus violating the spirit of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and jeopardizing regional peace and stability, China's military spokesperson said "China will respond resolutely to any action in the South China Sea that infringes on its legitimate rights or is provocative in nature"⁷⁷. The statement was made in response to a media query regarding the Philippine Coast Guard claim that its vessels were closely approached by the China Coast Guard. He called on the US to uphold its commitment of not taking a position on the South China Sea issue.

Japan Expresses Concern About Surge in Tensions in South China Sea⁷⁸. Expressing serious concern about recent dangerous actions that led to collisions between Chinese and Filipino vessels and injuries to Filipinos in the South China Sea, Japan opposed any attempt to change the status quo by forces as well as actions that increased tensions in the South China Sea. Concurring with the Philippines' objections to unlawful maritime claims, militarization and coercive activities, Japan appreciated the Philippines consistently having complied with the South China Sea Arbitral Award, described the award as legally binding and final, and said it has consistently upheld the rule of law at sea and will cooperate with ASEAN member states and the US to protect the free and open international order based on the "rule of law". The statement is among the strongest that Japan has made against China in recent memory.

North Korea's Missile Tests. North Korea was reported to have fired at least three ballistic missiles on March 18, even as US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken was in Seoul for the Democracy Summit⁷⁹. A day later, Pyongyang was reported to have successfully tested the engine for its intermediate range hypersonic missile, designed to hit US targets in Alaska and the Pacific⁸⁰.

⁷⁶ China denounces US warship's transit through Taiwan Strait,

http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16291111.html

⁷⁷ "China will respond resolutely to provocations in South China Sea: defense ministry", February 29, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16289816.html

⁷⁸ Recent Surge in Tensions in the South China Sea, March 06, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00192.html

⁷⁹ North Korea lunches three ballistic missiles as top US Diplomat visits Seoul, March 18, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/03/18/asia-pacific/politics/north-korea-missile-march-18/>

⁸⁰ North Korea tests Hypersonic Missile, Threatening US, March 20, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/20/north-korea-hypersonic-missile-test-kim/>



USS Annapolis Arrives HMAS Stirling⁸¹. USS Annapolis (SSN 760) made the second visit by a USN fast attack submarine to HMAS Stirling in Perth after announcement of the AUKUS optimal pathway in March 2023. The visit is part of the rotational deployment of USN submarines to Australia announced in the optimal pathway.

MV Rubymar⁸². The Belize-flagged, UK-owned bulk carrier MV Rubymar, hit by a Houthi anti-ship ballistic missile on February 18, 2024, sank in the Red Sea on the morning of March 2. The ship had been taking on water since being hit. The wreck is a risk to other ships transiting the busy shipping lane, while the 21,000 tons of fertilizer it was carrying is an environmental risk.

JMSDF Bahrain Navy Exercise⁸³. Following a port call at Mina Salman from March 9-11, JS Sazanami conducted the first ever goodwill exercise with the Royal Bahrain Navy on leaving harbour. FSGH Al Muharraq represented the Royal Bahrain Navy. The presence of a JMSDF ship deep inside the Persian Gulf speaks of its changed deployment pattern.

Exercise Sea Security Belt 2024. The sixth edition of Exercise Sea Security Belt took place in the Gulf of Oman from March 12-14⁸⁴. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the exercise involved more than 20 vessels from the three navies and was to include the participation of observers from Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, India and South Africa⁸⁵. The objective was practising safety in "maritime economic activities", and it encompassed manoeuvres, firing exercises and "liberating a ship hijacked by pirates".

President Biden Signs Appropriations Bill⁸⁶. President Biden signed into law the 'Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024', which provides funding for Government projects and agencies till September 30, 2024.

⁸¹ USS Annapolis Port Visit in Perth, Australia, March 11, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3702815/uss-annapolis-port-visit-in-perth-australia/>

⁸² "Sinking of Motor Vessel Rubymar Risks Environmental Damage", March 2, 2024, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3693370/sinking-of-motor-vessel-rubymar-risks-environmental-damage/>

⁸³ Japan – Kingdom of Bahrain Goodwill Exercise, March 12, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202403/20240312_01en.pdf

⁸⁴ Russia, China and Iran's Navy ships launch Sea Security Belt-2024 naval exercise in Gulf of Oman, https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12504189@egNews

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Press Release: Bill Signed: HR 2882, March 23, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2024/03/23/press-release-bill-signed-h-r-2882/>



UK's Littoral Response Group in Chennai for Maintenance⁸⁷. After exercising with the Indian Navy in the Arabian Sea, the UK's Littoral Response Group, comprising Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) Argus and RFA Lyme Bay arrived Chennai on March 26 for maintenance at the L&T shipyard in Kattupalli. UK and India committed to strengthening defence relations during the visit of Shri Rajnath Singh to the UK in January 2024. This included the launch of Defence Partnership-India, a bespoke office designed to further defence collaboration between the UK and India. It also included sending the UK's Littoral Response Group (South) to India for joint exercises and the use of the L&T Shipyard for maintenance, as well as the visit of the UK's Carrier Strike Group visit to operate and train with the Indian Armed Forces in 2025. A bilateral logistics-sharing agreement allows for the provision of logistic support, supplies and services, for joint training, joint exercises, authorised port visits and HADR operations.

⁸⁷ UK Royal Navy Vessels Arrive in Chennai on Landmark Visit, March 27, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-royal-navy-vessels-arrive-in-chennai-on-landmark-visit>



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