

## GLOBAL INSIGHT

## INDIA

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# New Delhi rethinks how to project power on the high seas

India, a rising military power that proudly shuns alliances, last month deployed a frigate to the Arabian Sea and demonstrated just how much its view of the world is changing. With little fanfare and after decades of touting India's "strategic autonomy", New Delhi sent the INS Talwar on a mission to provide direct support to a US-led maritime coalition.

The frigate's role was helping to intercept a drug-running dhow trafficking 940kg of methamphetamines, hashish and heroin in the Arabian Sea, working in a task force of the Bahrain-headquartered Combined Maritime Forces.

But far from being a routine drug bust, this marked a strategic sea change for a country that until now has joined international military missions only under the UN flag.

"India has quietly, formally, entered a coalition," said a western official in New Delhi. "They haven't been sounding the megaphone and we are not trying to overly publicise this and spook the herd, but it's a significant moment."

The operation came as India is aligning more closely with the US on military and economic matters, in large part because of shared concerns about China. There are still limits to co-operation. India declined to join Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US-led coalition formed last year to halt Yemen-based Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. But since November it has been working with the 43-nation CMF, which polices main shipping lanes in the western Indian Ocean under the US Fifth Fleet.

India's navy has also been increasing Red Sea patrols recently, escorting ships, and in a few cases rescuing crews from pirate attack. India supplies many sailors on merchant vessels, 17 of whom were temporarily taken captive last month near the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian troops. "The fact we're part of the CMF is not just a statement of closeness to the US," said Indrani Bagchi of the Ananta Aspen Centre, a New Delhi think-tank. "[It] is not only to put our flag there, but to [state] we are a net security provider in this region."

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India's diplomatic and military independence is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, but a tilt towards the west has been long in coming. Jawaharlal Nehru was among the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. India's scepticism of the west dates from the cold war, when it was upset by Washington's arming of Pakistan, an ongoing irritant, and found the Soviet Union a more reliable friend.

But Indian officials and analysts say China is now India's foremost strategic threat, not Pakistan. So while the Modi government continues to disavow the word "alliance", New Delhi does have burgeoning defence and tech partnerships with countries such as the US, France and Israel. It has also been retooling its military and redeployed some troops it had along the Pakistan border to its long, disputed frontier with China after fatal clashes there in 2020.

India is also upgrading its navy and asserting its presence. Its highest-profile effort is membership in the so-called Quad, where security issues are co-ordinated with the US, Australia and Japan. India and France have also put on naval patrols from the French territory Réunion. India and the Seychelles held military exercises in March.

"Growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is a canker for US presence and objectives, and for everybody else, and for India, given the lack of transparency in China's motives and intentions," said Sujan Chinoy of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

India is projecting soft power in the broader Indian Ocean basin, too — helped by the presence of diaspora populations there. IIT Madras, the southernmost of India's network of elite tech universities, recently chose Zanzibar for its first overseas campus. But some overtures have been snubbed. The Maldives, which alternates between a pro-India and pro-China stance, is replacing the few Indian troops there with civilians after Mohamed Muizzu won the presidency last year on an "India Out" platform.

For India, this is likely to be a long game.