

SAILING TOGETHER IFR 2026 AND MULTINATIONAL NAVAL EXERCISE

"The waters that lap our coast also wash your shores, these great blue 'COMMONS' indeed link us to each other."

- Shri Pranab Mukherjee, former President of India at IFR 2016

Introduction

The world is about to witness a Global Maritime Convergence, the largest assembly of naval forces and maritime leadership ever organised in the Indian Ocean Region from 15- 25 Feb 26 at Visakhapatnam. This historic event integrates three major pillars of Indian Naval Maritime Cooperation: The International Fleet Review (IFR) 2026, the 13th edition of Exercise MILAN and the 9th Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Conclave of Chiefs.

Under the central themes of "United Through Oceans" and "Camaraderie, Cooperation, Collaboration," this Maritime Convergence serves as the operational manifestation of India's MAHASAGAR vision (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).

IFR 2026: A Milestone of Seventy-Five Years

The tradition of 'reviewing' a fleet dates back to the 14th Century in Great Britain with the purpose of showcasing the maritime might of the largest colonial rulers of the world. India embraced this tradition with the first Presidential Fleet Review (PFR) on 10 Oct 1953 by President Rajendra Prasad, marking the shift from the 'Kings Navy' to the 'Peoples Navy'. For nearly five decades (1953-2001), India only conducted PFRs. To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Republic of India, the first ever invitation to international participants was extended in 2001, transitioning a long-borne tradition of PFR to IFR. After expanding the scale and scope in 2016 (2nd Edition of IFR), IFR 2026 is going to become one of the largest stages, a first of its kind, for international participants. It holds a deep symbolic value coinciding with the 75th Anniversary of the Republic of India.

This is only the third International Fleet Review in India's history (previous editions were held in 2001 in Mumbai and 2016 in Visakhapatnam). While the 2016 IFR saw 50 countries, as on date, over 70 countries are expected to

participate in IFR 2026, including major powers like the U.S., Russia, Japan, and Australia. On 18 Feb 2026, Hon'ble President Droupadi Murmu will review a massive assembly of over 70 warships anchored in four distinct columns off the coast of RK Beach.

MILAN 2026: From a Regional Ripple to a Global Tide

If the International Fleet Review is the 'Ceremony', Exercise MILAN is its 'Powerhouse'. What began in 1995 as a modest gathering of four neighbouring navies has transformed into one of the largest and most complex multilateral maritime exercises in the world. MILAN 2026 represents the pinnacle of this growth, transitioning from a localised security initiative into a global theatre for maritime interoperability.

*** The Growth Curve:** Starting in 1995 with just 4 navies (Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), the 2024 edition saw 47 countries. MILAN 2026 is expected to break all records with over 50 participating navies.

*** Operational Scale:** The operational scale of MILAN has expanded from the backyard of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 1995 to the vast seas of the Bay of Bengal in 2022.

*** MILAN 2026:** The 2026 edition of the exercise would be the largest of its kind both in operational scale and tempo. It will involve two distinct phases, namely, the Harbour Phase and the Sea Phase. Whilst the Harbour Phase would offer a common stage to organise international maritime seminars, cultural and subject matter expert exchanges; the Sea Phase would involve high intensity drills in all domains of naval warfare and complex surface manoeuvres.

Sailing Together: A Global Maritime Convergence in 2026

The concept of "Sailing Together" is more than a slogan; it is a strategic philosophy that emphasises that the world's oceans are a 'Global Common' requiring collective guardianship. IFR and MILAN 2026 are set to bring the navies from distant shores to the City of Destiny, Visakhapatnam to vitalise this slogan. The key concepts that will be realised during the events are. -

*** The 'Bridge of Friendship':** The IFR 2026 theme, "United Through Oceans" suggests that the sea is not a barrier but a highway for connection. By bringing together over 70 nations- including those with different geopolitical stances like the U.S. and Russia - India uses these events as a neutral ground for naval

diplomacy. When the warships from different nations will anchor in the same harbour, it will signify a mutual respect for a rule-based maritime order.

*** Operational Synergy:** In MILAN 2026, "Sailing Together" will move from theory to practice during the Sea Phase. Navies from diverse nations, using different technologies, would work in unison to perform complex drills and manoeuvres to achieve a common objective. This would build operational interoperability, ensuring that if a real world crisis (natural disaster/ piracy threat) occurs, these nations can seamlessly form a task force and "sail together" to address it.

*** The MAHASAGAR Vision:** "Sailing Together" is the operational arm of India's MAHASAGAR initiative. It signifies 'collective responsibility' to ensure security over the vast seas and 'shared growth' through maritime trade.

*** Cultural and Human Connect:** Beyond the steel and the cannons, the events of IFR and MILAN such as the City Parade, MILAN Village and Sports Fixtures will build 'Camaraderie' that would make long-term 'Cooperation' and Collaboration possible.

Conclusion: A Shared Destiny

IFR and MILAN 2026 will represent a landmark achievement in India's maritime diplomacy, transforming the shores of Visakhapatnam into a global hub of naval cooperation. During the events, the whole spectacle of warships will symbolise more than just military readiness. It will represent a "Maritime Renaissance"—a world where diverse navies sail together to protect the global commons. As the sun sets over the Bay of Bengal on the final day of MILAN 2026, the message will be clear: while the oceans may be vast, the bridges of friendship built upon them unite nations to share pursuit of peace, stability and collective prosperity.



FROM

SAGAR TO MAHASAGAR



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