

Joris van Boven and Alex van Noije visit...

The International Fleet Review and MILAN 2026

Visakhapatnam, India; 18–19 February 2026



United through oceans

The Indian Ocean has become one of the world's most critical strategic theaters. In February 2026, the coastal city of Visakhapatnam served as the stage for a massive display of naval diplomacy with the start of the International Fleet Review (IFR) and Exercise MILAN. With 74 nations and 85 warships gathered, the event was a powerful statement of India's multi-aligned foreign policy and its rise as a 'Builder's Navy.' Through the scope of the 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' initiative, the assembly showcased indigenous giants like the destroyer INS Mormugao and the carrier INS Vikrant. However, the maritime world is defined by a thin line between ceremony and conflict. While the 'United through Oceans' theme fostered cooperation in the Bay of Bengal, the reality of modern naval warfare waited just over the horizon. The subsequent loss of the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena, a participant in the review, shook the international community and underscored the 'No War No Peace' paradox of the region. This report analyses the operational synergy of MILAN 2026, the technical leap of India's domestic defence industry, and the sobering transition from diplomatic parades to way forward to 'Viksit Bharat 2047' which is the road to full self-reliance.

The strategic Indian anchor

In February 2026, the Bay of Bengal became the centre of the naval world for a few days. The Indian Navy (IN) hosted its largest maritime event since the country gained independence. This assembly consisted of two main parts; the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2026 and the Exercise MILAN 2026. From February 15 until 25, the city of Visakhapatnam turned into a hub for naval diplomacy and military power. These events took place during a time of high tension in the region. Even so, India acted as a neutral host. The chosen theme for the event was 'United through Oceans.' The scale of this 2026 edition was much larger than previous years. In 2016, the IFR hosted 50 countries. By 2026, that number grew to 74 participating nations. The total fleet included 85 warships in this edition. Out of these, 18 ships belonged to foreign navies. The entire programme rested on three main strategic pillars. First was the ceremonial IFR, where the President of India inspected the fleet. Second was the operational sea phase of the exercise MILAN. Third was the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Conclave of Chiefs, where top naval leaders met. Captain (OF-5) Geordie Klein of the Royal Netherlands Navy provided a professional perspective on these events. He serves as the Dutch Defence Attaché for