India-Philippines Naval Drills in South China Sea Spark Beijing's Anger

India and the Philippines have conducted their first-ever joint naval exercises in the disputed South China Sea, a move that has drawn strong criticism from China. The two-day maritime drills, which began Sunday, were aimed at enhancing interoperability and strengthening defense ties between the two nations, both of which have separate territorial disputes with Beijing. This high-profile military deployment has been described by Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. as a "powerful signal of solidarity."

The exercise, which included the Indian Navy’s guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi and the Philippine Navy's frigate BRP Miguel Malvar, took place within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. According to the Philippine military, Chinese navy ships, including a guided-missile destroyer, "shadowed" the joint patrol, a reaction that was "expected." The drills coincide with a five-day state visit by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to India, where he is scheduled to hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to deepen defense and security cooperation.

In response to the drills, China's Southern Theater Command accused the Philippines of "drawing in outside countries" to organize joint patrols that it said "undermine regional peace and stability." Beijing has long held expansive claims to nearly the entire South China Sea, a stance that was rejected by a 2016 international arbitral tribunal ruling. China, however, continues to disregard the verdict. China's Foreign Ministry also stated that territorial disputes should be resolved by those directly involved without any third-party intervention.

For the Philippines, the joint drills are part of a broader strategy to modernize its armed forces and strengthen deterrence. General Brawner has stated that a key way to prevent conflict is to partner with "like-minded nations" such as India. The Philippines has already acquired India's BrahMos supersonic cruise missile system and is reportedly exploring the possibility of purchasing more defense equipment from New Delhi. India, which has its own long-standing land border dispute with China, has been increasing its support for the Philippines and other regional partners amid Beijing’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.