

Indian Ocean new centre of maritime interests ^{HTS}

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INDIA IS set to engage former Cold War rivals USA and Russia in naval exercises soon, reflecting the deepened interest of major maritime powers in the Indian Ocean Region.

An Indian Navy spokesman said joint exercises with the Russian Navy would take place in May-June. Defence Minister George Fernandes told Parliament on Thursday that the exercise with the US Navy is scheduled from May 6 to 8 off Mumbai.

However, a spokesman

of the US Embassy here said while these dates were under discussion earlier, a final schedule is yet to be decided. But the general understanding is that it's going to happen soon.

But it's the impending Russian presence in Indian Ocean that's creating the ripples. The Russian armada will stay put in the region for about four months. This is the first military posture by Russia after the end of the Cold War.

The other significance is that the Russia and India militaries will operationally engage for the first time. It's a great para-

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dox that while the two countries have for decades shared a robust defence supply relationship, they never engaged each other in military exercise.

Wary of insinuations that it was a Soviet ally during the Cold War years, India had avoided such an engagement, and was, in fact, uncomfortable even at the prospect of Soviet warships docking at Indian ports.

The paradox is finally being resolved, and at a scale which seems to make up the coyness of the past. "Ten frontline warships of the Russian Pacific and Black Sea Fleets will take part in the exercises, which are being planned on the west and east coasts of India," the Naval spokesman said, confirming a *Hindustan Times* report on Monday.

"The Indian Navy would also field a suitable number of ships and submarines. In addition, naval helicopters and maritime patrol aircraft will also participate," he said.



File photograph of a US warship.

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