

Nirmala flags Indian Ocean issues

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with Navy chief Admiral Sunil Lanba and others at Dabolim on Wednesday. PTI

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday expressed concern at the increased militarisation in the Indian Ocean and the extra-regional nations setting up a “near permanent presence” in the region, in an apparent reference to the expanding Chinese presence in the region.

“We have also witnessed extra-regional nations maintain near permanent presence within the region on one pretext or the other. In order to sustain such a presence through operational turn around, these countries which are extra-regional are creating naval outposts as well as dual-use infrastructure in the region,” Ms. Sitharaman said.

She was addressing the first Goa Maritime Conclave of Navy Chiefs of Indian Ocean littoral states hosted by the Indian Navy at the Naval War College in Goa.

Stating that there is an “incremental yet steady” increase in numbers of warships operating in the region, Ms. Sitharaman said this militarisation “increases the complexities for the countries of this region.”

The GMC is intended to be held every year and aims to “bring together like-minded countries to evolve collective responses to challenges in the maritime domain.”

Maritime challenges

Ms. Sitharaman said that land-based disputes and riparian issues which are predominantly a legacy of colonial rule are a key cause for conflict. “As international behaviour in the maritime domain is influenced considerably by land-based imperatives, cordiality or latent hostility prevalent among nations on land tends to get reflected in the seas too,” she stated.

In the last few years, China has set up or acquired stakes in a series of infrastructure facilities in the region and has recently opened its first overseas military base at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

The Chinese Navy has also maintained a steady presence of warships and submarines in the Indian Ocean under the garb of anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

To counter this, the Indian Navy has now put in place a new concept of ‘mission based deployment’ to maintain round the clock surveillance on India’s vital areas of interest across the length and breadth of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

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