

Thailand explores buying Indian vessels

Rezaul H Laskar

letters@hindustantimes.com

NEWDELHI: Thailand is looking at the acquisition of coastal radars and patrol vessels from India as the two sides ramp up cooperation in maritime security, Thai ambassador Chutintorn Gongsakdi said on Tuesday.

Defence cooperation between the two countries currently includes joint exercises, training of personnel at each other's military training institutions and exchange of visits.

Naval cooperation has emerged as a "growth area" in bilateral military ties, Gong-

sakdi said.

"The Thai Navy is interested in coastal radars," he said, indicating the two sides were close to a decision.

He declined to go into details of the matter. The Thai Navy, he added, was also interested in Indian-made patrol vessels.

Following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which were carried out by Pakistani terrorists who approached India's financial hub by sea, New Delhi revamped its coastal defences, and state-run Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) has done considerable work in developing coastal surveillance radars.

Though India doesn't have an established track record as a supplier of major defence hardware, Gongsakdi noted South East Asian countries were looking for "good alternatives" to Western gear that come at the "right price".

Gongsakdi said several measures are being considered by both sides to boost military and naval cooperation.

"The things that are on the table are the Thailand-Singapore-India joint naval exercises, the joint patrol in the Malacca Strait and full participation status (for India) in the Cobra Gold exercise," he said.

The trilateral joint patrol was proposed by India and Singapore, he said, adding he was hopeful of a "positive" response from Thailand.

In 2016, India participated for the first time as an observer in Cobra Gold, the largest annual wargame in the Asia-Pacific region that is held in Thailand.

A 14-member Indian team will join the next edition of the exercise in February.

"In Thailand, we feel India is pursuing engagement with Thailand more than in the past, and this is specifically in the maritime area," Gongsakdi said.

"I've noticed that the relation

between the navies is stronger."

Constantino Xavier, a fellow at Brookings India, a research group, said South East nations were interested in deeper security relations with India, especially in the maritime domain, but were "increasingly feeling pressure from China".

"Often, they realise the importance of a balancing game as they are increasingly economically entangled with China," he said.

"The logic of security cooperation between India and South East Asia is important, but no substitute to economic interdependence between the two regions."