

# How India's response to Iran's distress call offshore Kochi was justified

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*Naval academies send cadets on warships for training, but they are not combatants. International humanitarian law does not clearly define their status, creating legal and moral uncertainty when these vessels face conflict or danger*



*The Kochi episode offers more than a momentary diplomatic story; it underscores the need for renewed discussion on how international law should balance military necessity with humanitarian protection in the complex environment of the world's oceans. Representational image*

International humanitarian law has long drawn a clear distinction between combatants and civilians during armed conflict. Combatants are lawful participants in hostilities and may be targeted by enemy forces, while civilians are protected from direct attack. Under the Geneva Conventions and the established rules governing naval warfare, members of a state's armed forces are categorised as combatants. Consequently, military vessels such as warships are legitimate military objectives during armed conflict. However, the evolving realities of modern military training and maritime operations have exposed gaps in these traditional classifications, particularly regarding the legal status of military trainees or cadets aboard naval vessels.

Naval academies across the world routinely place cadets on training voyages aboard operational warships. These voyages are designed to provide practical experience and expose trainees to life at sea. Yet, these individuals are not combatants in the traditional sense: they are students undergoing training and typically do not participate in active hostilities. International humanitarian law, however, does not clearly address whether such cadets should be treated as combatants or as individuals deserving of special protection. When a warship carrying trainees becomes involved in a conflict or faces danger, this ambiguity becomes legally and morally significant.

This uncertainty was highlighted in the recent episode involving an Iranian naval vessel that was allowed to dock in Kochi, India. The ship reportedly carried naval cadets who were on a training voyage when it encountered distress at sea. In allowing the vessel to dock and receive assistance, India demonstrated a commitment to the humanitarian traditions that have historically governed maritime conduct. The decision can be better understood within the framework of international maritime law, which places a strong emphasis on the duty to rescue individuals in distress at sea.

The principle that all persons in danger at sea must be assisted is deeply embedded in international law. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue establish a universal obligation for states and shipmasters to render assistance to anyone in distress at sea, regardless of nationality, status, or the political relationship between states. These rules reflect a long-standing maritime tradition that prioritises human life above political or military considerations.

India's decision to permit the vessel to dock therefore aligns with these humanitarian obligations. Even though the individuals aboard belonged to the armed forces of another state, their distress at sea triggered an international duty of assistance. Maritime law recognizes that the ocean is a shared and often dangerous environment where cooperation among states is essential to safeguard human life. In this sense, India's action reinforced a principle that transcends geopolitical rivalries: that humanitarian assistance at sea must remain unconditional.

At the same time, the incident raises broader legal questions about neutrality and the treatment of military personnel in distress. Traditionally, when neutral states assist

foreign military vessels, they must ensure that their actions do not compromise their neutral status in an ongoing conflict. By limiting its role to humanitarian assistance rather than providing military support, India appears to have carefully navigated this delicate balance between neutrality and humanitarian responsibility.

The more complex legal question concerns the status of the cadets themselves. If a naval warship becomes a legitimate military target during armed conflict, does that automatically mean that everyone aboard, including trainees, is treated as a combatant? Under the current framework of international humanitarian law, the answer is largely yes. Because cadets are members of the armed forces, they are generally considered combatants even if they are not actively participating in hostilities. However, this classification may not fully reflect the reality of their role.

There is a growing argument among legal scholars that military trainees should receive a form of special protection similar to non-combat personnel, particularly when they are not engaged in combat operations. Such protection would be consistent with the broader humanitarian goals of international law, which seek to limit unnecessary suffering during armed conflict. Just as medical personnel and religious staff within the armed forces are afforded certain protections, a case could be made for recognising the unique status of military cadets who are primarily engaged in education rather than warfare.

The Kochi episode therefore serves as an important reminder that international law must continuously adapt to evolving circumstances. Maritime law has long been guided by principles of solidarity and humanitarian assistance, but modern military practices increasingly blur the traditional lines between combatants and non-combatants. Training vessels, dual-purpose ships, and multinational naval exercises complicate the application of existing legal categories.

For India, the decision to allow the Iranian vessel to dock also reflects its broader diplomatic approach. As a country that has historically emphasised respect for international law and humanitarian principles, India's response reinforced its reputation as a responsible maritime actor. By adhering to international obligations while carefully maintaining neutrality, India demonstrated how states can uphold humanitarian values even in politically sensitive situations.

Ultimately, the incident highlights a broader challenge for international humanitarian law. As military training and maritime operations evolve, the law must clarify how individuals such as naval cadets should be treated during armed conflict. Whether through new interpretations or future legal developments, addressing this ambiguity would help ensure that humanitarian principles remain at the heart of maritime governance.

The Kochi episode thus offers more than a momentary diplomatic story; it underscores the need for renewed discussion on how international law should balance military necessity with humanitarian protection in the complex environment of the world's oceans.

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