



ISSUE BRIEF

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MALABAR EXERCISE 2018: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



US, India and Japan held the 22nd round of the annual Malabar Naval Exercise from June 7-16, 2018 off the coast of Guam. India declined Australia's request to participate in the 2018 drill.

The exercise took place at a time when India has already stretched itself across the Indian Ocean. It is also acting as a



partner in the "Indo-Pacific" strategy of the US to contain China in the region.¹ The increasing trilateral presence is a result of the growing military presence of China, and which seeks to present a direct counter to the increasing influence of China in the maritime domain.

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The Malabar exercises started off as bilateral war games conducted by the US and India in 1992. They were held annually, but were suspended from 1998 to 2002 after India conducted its nuclear tests in 1998. Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) entered the war games officially in 2015; however, it participated in several drills since 2007. The exercises were driven by the common interests of the states and their vision of peace and security in the larger Asia-Pacific including maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime domain awareness and the formation of regional partnerships.²

This year's exercise marked a milestone because it was the first time in the last 26 years that the US Navy hosted Malabar. In June, 2018 the US Secretary of Defense James Mattis revealed that US Pacific Command was being renamed as US Indo-Pacific Command in light of the increasing connectivity between India and US. He further stated that Malabar represents the commitment of US to cooperate with regional powers in the Indian and Pacific Ocean.³ The exercise was held in two phases: Harbor Phase (from June 7-10); and the Sea Phase (June 11-16). The former focused on ashore training at the Guam naval base, while the latter revolved around at-sea training in the Philippine Sea. The core objectives of the 2018 Malabar war games were to practice surface and anti-submarine warfare operations (submarine hunting), maritime control and reconnaissance operations, medical and helicopter operations, damage control, combined carrier strike operations, and visit, board, search and seizure operations (VBSS).⁴

India had made its largest contribution of warships in the history of Malabar exercises held in 2017, in light of its growing tensions with China at Doklam.⁵ Although the latter has claimed to have no issues with the trilateral exercises, its vessels tailed the former till they reached the Pacific Ocean for the 2018 war games. The exercise is a manifestation of an alliance against China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean region. If relations between India, US, Japan and Australia continue to flourish, littoral states in the South China Sea will align themselves with the Quad (US, India, Japan, Australia); hence presenting a threat to Chinese hegemony and enhancing the sphere of US

¹ "India, Japan, US: Malabar Exercise 2018 to Be Held off Coast of Guam in Philippine Sea," *Current Affairs Today* (June 01, 2018), accessed June 24, 2018, <https://currentaffairs.gktoday.in/india-japan-us-malabar-exercise-2018-held-coast-guam-philippine-sea-06201855794.html>

² William McCann, "U.S., Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Indian Naval Forces Conclude Malabar 2018," *Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet* (June 20, 2018), accessed June 24, 2018, <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130342>

³ Ben Werner, "U.S., India, Japan Navies Start Malabar Exercise Tomorrow in Guam," *U.S. Naval Institute News* (June 6, 2018), accessed June 24, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/06/06/u-s-india-japan-navies-start-malabar-exercise-on-thursday>

⁴ "Malabar naval exercise: All you need to know in 10 points," *The Times of India*, accessed June 24, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/malabar-naval-exercise-all-you-need-to-know-in-10-points/articleshow/59522548.cms>

⁵ Shashank Joshi, "Malabar 17 Exercise: The China Subtext," *The Interpreter* (July 16, 2017), accessed June 25, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/malabar-17-exercise-china-subtext>

influence in the region.⁶ Washington and Tokyo have backed New Delhi's Look East Policy and believe that it can be a balancer for Beijing in the region. The triple alliance has a policy of containment towards China. India already has the upper hand when it comes to this region due to its geostrategic location, whereas the People's Republic of China faces vulnerabilities particularly at the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. Therefore, it is seeking to build a Maritime Silk Route (MSR) as an alternative.⁷

The Quad, China and Pakistan have geostrategic interests in Asia-Pacific region. The problem faced by Pakistan, however, is that it has yet to bring forth an official maritime doctrine. Till then, Pakistan's vision of the region and its larger maritime interests is unclear. The general public of Pakistan is unaware of the economic and strategic importance of the sea. Strong actions and advocacy campaigns are required to promote how its coastline can be one of Pakistan's biggest assets and how the country can reap maximum benefit from the Indian Ocean.



Pakistan has always promoted peace in the Indian Ocean through its actions and diplomatic efforts. However, on the other hand, India is not ready to accept Pakistan as an important littoral state of the region. An indication of this is the non inclusion of Pakistan in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). This puts severe pressure on Pakistan to remain neutral and continue to promote peace. Pakistan is also an ally of China which is under pressure by exercises like Malabar. As a result, Indian Ocean at present portrays a very complex picture of regional interests and global actors. It is the responsibility of Pakistan to not only maintain its stature as a peaceful state, but also exercise its options to increase its maritime capabilities both within and beyond the region.

⁶ S.K. Chatterji, "India's role in resisting Chinese maritime hegemony," *Asia Times* (June 7, 2018), accessed on June 25, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/indias-role-in-resisting-chinese-maritime-hegemony/>

⁷ David Brewster, "An Indian Ocean dilemma: Sino-Indian rivalry and China's strategic vulnerability in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 11:1, 48-59.