



GROWING INDIAN INTEREST IN MALABAR NAVAL EXERCISE

By
Dost Muhammad Barrech
Research Associate
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

December 18, 2020

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



Malabar-I, the first naval exercise between US and India was held in 1992 as part of a joint training in basic sea-based operations. The exercises were discontinued in 1998 following the nuclear tests by India and were resumed again in 2002. The exercise has been an annual feature between US and India since that year and later joined by Japan in 2015.¹ Australia by following the trajectory of the US, India and Japan also joined the exercise in 2007.

The Malabar exercise entails various naval operations including combat maneuvers and simulated war games.² Interestingly, all four countries of Malabar exercise are also members of the Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that recently held a meeting on October 6, 2020 in Tokyo, Japan. The Quad members through Malabar exercise apparently want to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Quad members perceive China as a threat to freedom of navigation, rule of law, sovereignty, respect for territorial integrity, free trade markets and peaceful dispute resolution.³

The latest phase of Malabar exercise began from November 3-6, 2020 in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean with participation of the United States Navy (USN), Indian Navy (IN), Royal Australian

¹ Kaushik, K., "Explained: The purpose, participants of the Malabar navy exercise," *The Indian Express*. November 3, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/malabar-naval-exercise-india-6915447>

² Ibid.

³ Brahma Chellaney, "The quad: Asia's own NATO?," *The ASEAN Post*. October 19, 2020 <https://theaseanpost.com/article/quad-asias-own-nato>

Navy (RAN) and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).⁴ In the first phase of the exercise, advanced and complex naval maneuvers were carried out including anti-air warfare drills, submarine and surface weapon firing exercises. Australia also participated in the Malabar exercise after 2007 ostensibly showcasing the growing convergence of interest among Quad states to contain the Chinese in the region.⁵

The second phase of Malabar exercise was conducted in the Northern Arabian Sea from November 17-20, 2020 in the Indian Ocean between the four navies. The statement issued by the Malabar exercise official said that, “The two aircraft carriers, along with other ships, submarine and aircraft of the participating navies, engaged in high intensity naval operations including cross-deck flying operations and advanced air defense exercises by MIG 29K fighters of Vikramaditya and F/A-18 fighters and E2C Hawkeye from Nimitz.”⁶

US and India via the Malabar naval exercise appear to be more obsessed with the containment of China. New Delhi is already engaged with China in a military stand-off in Ladakh. The *Hindustan Times* maintains that, “The road to peace in the mountains may lie through the sea.”⁷ In this regard, defense analyst Captain D. K. Sharma maintains that Malabar exercise will prove productive for India as, “It will be the best of the best.”⁸

According to retired Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, the participation of Quad countries in Malabar maneuvers have strengthened their naval powers in the Indian Ocean and giving a clear message to China that India is not alone in the ocean.⁹ Alok Bansal, a strategic expert opines that the prevailing maneuvers are essential to make cohesion among the navies of Quad members in the event of conflict and exercise Malabar will prove more beneficial in each other’s communication model.¹⁰

China’s phenomenal economic success and its headway in military modernization have clearly widened the gap in the military and naval capabilities of China and India. As China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further intensifies its influence in the region, India, therefore, is becoming exceedingly

⁴ “Navies of India, US, Japan, Australia Conclude Phase 1 of Malabar 2020 Naval Exercise,” *The Economic Times*, November 7, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/navies-of-india-us-japan-australia-conclude-phase-1-of-malabar-2020-naval-exercise/articleshow/79097428.cms>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “What is the Malabar Exercise, and Why is It Significant,” *Deccan Herald*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/what-is-the-malabar-exercise-and-why-is-it-significant-904598.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ravi Dubey, “Malabar Naval Exercise 2020: What is So Special About It That Worries China?,” *DNA India*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/news-malabar-naval-exercise-2020-what-is-so-special-about-it-that-worries-china-2857322>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

wary of Beijing's growing foothold in the Indian Ocean.¹¹ Though India has been modernizing its capabilities and enhancing its maritime power, it is still unable to compete with China's modernization in the maritime security domain. New Delhi therefore, will try to work with Quad members so that they could collectively counter China's presence in the region.¹²

Meanwhile, Indian sovereignty in its territorial waters has not been challenged by Chinese warships. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has never disturbed the Indian merchant ships in the regional sea lanes nor has it blocked any choke points so far.¹³ Chinese Navy avoids entanglement with Indian naval ships particularly in sub-continental littorals states that are more happy with Beijing's presence in the region and are looking forward to benefiting from China economically and militarily.¹⁴ Admittedly, Chinese naval and intelligence foothold adjacent to Andaman Islands has also increased. However, Chinese maritime agencies assure New Delhi that such operations will not cross the threshold of war with India.¹⁵

India, on the other hand, with the help of the US is committed to embroiling, South Korea, France, Japan, Australia and Singapore, in the Indo-Pacific region security and India has already inked the military logistic pacts with them.¹⁶ South Asia, arguably, is increasingly becoming a playground for regional and global players economically as well as militarily; major powers will leave no stone unturned to enhance their clout in the region.¹⁷ Sri Lanka and Maldives, small littoral states in the Indian Ocean, are geographically well-placed, and are currently under Beijing's influence. India has been trying to bring these two crucial littoral states under its influence and has welcomed Defense Cooperation Agreement signed between US-Maldives in September, 2020. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in the following months visited Maldives and announced that US would open its embassy soon in Male.¹⁸

Within three months after signing Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US, Male signed another agreement of \$7.6 million with Tokyo by availing itself of Japanese grant. India castigates

¹¹ Harsh V. Pant and Anant Singh Mann, "India's Malabar Dilemma," *ORF*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-malabar-dilemma/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Abhijit Singh, "Make the Right Call on 'Malabar' Going Quad," *The Hindu*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/make-the-right-call-on-malabar-going-quad/article32132584.ece>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ashish Dangwal, "The Future of QUAD Grouping," *Modern Diplomacy*, November 23, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/11/24/the-future-of-quad-grouping/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bejoy Sebastian, "As Sri Lanka Struggles with Chinese Debt-trap, Maldives Moves Closer to the Quad," *Modern Diplomacy*, November 23, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/11/24/as-sri-lanka-struggles-with-chinese-debt-trap-maldives-moves-closer-to-the-quad/>.

China's debt-trap policy convincing Sri Lankan policy makers to quit Chinese bandwagon.¹⁹ Indian listening posts to monitor sea-lanes in Seychelles and Mauritius, the other littoral states in the Indian Ocean, is attributed to reduce Chinese clout in the region.²⁰

Modi unveiled Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine on February 7, 2016 at the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam and said that, "Our approach is evident in our vision of 'Sagar', which means 'Ocean'. India's quest for economic prosperity through oceans is a part of our larger efforts to transform India."²¹ He further maintained that, "Navies and maritime agencies of the world need to work together and engineer virtuous cycles of cooperation."²²

Modi's SAGAR doctrine shows that New Delhi will try to consolidate its naval power and presumably, will convince Quad members to further accelerate maritime power in the region to thwart China's presence. The Indian Ocean will determine the 21st century. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan rightly says that, "whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia". An increasing convergence of interests among Quad members through the Malabar exercise heads the Indian Ocean towards further militarization. Quad members must remember the fact that Indian Ocean is already the most militarized ocean connecting important commercial shipping lanes. A battle for naval superiority in the economically vibrant Indian Ocean will serve nobody's interest, neither those of Quad, nor the Chinese.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "IFR 2016: PM Modi Unveils 'Sagar' Doctrine of Transforming India Via Maritime Security," *India Writes*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.indiawrites.org/diplomacy/ifr-2016-pm-modi-unveils-sagar-doctrine-of-transforming-india-via-maritime-security/>.

²² Ibid.