

# INDIA IS RATHER TOO CAUTIOUS ON THE QUAD

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India has once again decided to reject Australia's participation in the Malabar naval exercises. Japan became a permanent member of these exercises in 2015. After the resumption of the quadrilateral dialogue, or the Quad, between India, the US, Japan and Australia in 2017, most analysts had assumed that Australia would be allowed in the Malabar exercises too. But Canberra has found it tough to woo New Delhi despite Tokyo and Washington backing Australia's entry. India has also rebuffed suggestions from the US to elevate the Quad dialogue to foreign secretary level from the current setup of joint secretary level talks. Curiously, India sees the Malabar exercises separately from the Quad. It also draws a clear line between the Quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy.

It is no surprise that India is now increasingly being considered the weakest link in the Quad. Ironically, one of the reasons India has been refusing Australia's participation in the Malabar exercises has to do with its own perception of Australia-China relations. New Delhi is not sure that the current tensions between Australia and China will outlast the stint of a Labor government in Canberra. It was, after all, Kevin Rudd, a Labor prime minister, who had pulled Australia out of the Quad in 2008. It is also believed that India fears that quadrilateral naval exercises will invite reprisals from China. As a country which shares a long and disputed border with China, India would be most vulnerable to such hostilities.

However, it has been proven time and again that respecting China's sensitivities is a one-way street; Beijing doesn't respect New Delhi's sensitivities in return. Indeed, a quadrilateral exercise will send out a political message to China. But it will also send a much needed message to other countries in Southeast Asia which are afraid to confront China on their own. Moreover, these exercises aren't merely about messaging. They are about building joint procedures to work together in crisis situations. A crisis need not be triggered only by China's activities but could well be the result of a tinpot dictator in the region or due to some natural disaster in the shared maritime space. The idea of Quad, one should recall, owes itself to the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean. It is high time India stopped dragging its feet on Australian participation in the Malabar exercises. Elevating the level of engagement in the Quad should be the next logical step.

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