

MALABAR MOMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Delhi's reported openness to Australia's participation in India's annual naval exercises with the US and Japan hopefully marks the end of its incredibly slow adaptation to a rapidly changing maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific littoral. In inviting Australia, Delhi is also hopefully putting away its needless defensiveness on choosing its partners for security cooperation. Way back in 2007, the Indian Navy invited the maritime forces of Japan, Australia and Singapore to join its annual bilateral Malabar naval exercises with the [United States](#). On the face of it, having a five-nation naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal seemed sensible, to optimise the costs of conducting so many separate bilateral exercises with India's partners. It turned out to be anything but.

In Delhi, all hell broke loose as [China](#) objected to the exercises and its media began to describe them as the first step towards the creation of an "Asian NATO". The defence minister of the UPA government, AK Antony, got hot under the collar at the political storm the Bay of Bengal exercises had triggered. The Left parties, which were a major part of the Congress-led UPA coalition, who were generally opposed to engagement with the West, announced street protests. An angry Antony pulled the plug on any multilateral naval exercises, but also applied political and bureaucratic brakes on the ambitious defence cooperation agenda that Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#) and his predecessor in the defence ministry, [Pranab Mukherjee](#), had agreed to in 2005. It was only the advent of the NDA government in 2014 that saw renewed momentum to India-US defence cooperation and more broadly India's naval and military diplomacy. It green lighted the participation of Japan in the Malabar exercises in 2015 and will now welcome Australia.

India, however, has lost much valuable time in the 13 years since the Bay of Bengal exercises. Today China is far more powerful and its navy now maintains a permanent feature of the Indian Ocean. It has acquired its first military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Karachi and Gwadar are already de-facto naval facilities for the PLA Navy. There is mounting speculation that Iran is about to let China develop port facilities at the mouth of the strategic Hormuz Strait in the Gulf. Meanwhile, China's political and military influence is growing in the island states of the Indian Ocean and the PLA has emerged as a major strategic actor in the east coast of Africa. Delhi had bet that deference to Chinese sensitivities would limit Beijing's potential threats to India. The opposite has happened. As China turns more assertive in the Great Himalayas as well as the Indian Ocean, Delhi is now scrambling to find answers. The decision to invite Australia into the Malabar exercise can only be a small part of a much larger strategy that Delhi needs to address the long term strategic consequences of China's rise and its impact on India's security.

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