

# MAKE THE RIGHT CALL ON 'MALABAR' GOING QUAD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

There is speculation in the media that New Delhi could soon invite Australia to join the Malabar naval exercises to be held later this year. According to reports, the most recent being Sunday (Page 1, *The Hindu*, July 19, 2020), a key meeting on Friday of India's Ministry of Defence discussed the [issue of adding Australia to the trilateral Malabar naval exercise](#) with Japan and the United States in the Bay of Bengal later this year. While no decision was reached, it appears a green signal to Australia could soon be given, making it the first time since 2007 that all members of Quad will participate in a joint military drill, [aimed ostensibly at China](#).

Beijing has long opposed a coalition of democracies in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese leadership sees the maritime Quadrilateral as an Asian-NATO that seeks only to contain China's rise. Earlier last week, an opinion piece in *The Global Times*, the Chinese communist party's mouthpiece, noted that at a time of strained bilateral ties with China, India's intention to involve Australia in the Malabar drill could only be construed as a move directed against Beijing. By "putting more pressure on China" and moving to expand its "sphere of influence into the entire Indian Ocean and the South Pacific", India, the article ([Strategic intent behind New Delhi's plan to invite Australia to join Malabar drill](#)) suggested, was risking harsh consequences.

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Expectedly, Indian commentators welcomed the development, hailing it as a long overdue move. Following the stand-off in Ladakh, many Indian analysts believe the time is right for India to shed its traditional defensiveness in the maritime domain. The realists advocate an alliance with the U.S., Japan and Australia to counter Chinese moves in the Indian Ocean.

Yet, Indian decision-makers have reason to be cautious. At a time when India and China are negotiating a truce on the border in Eastern Ladakh, New Delhi's invitation to Australia to participate in the Malabar exercise sends contrary signals to Beijing. If China responded churlishly — as is its wont — through aggressive posturing in the Eastern Indian Ocean, it could needlessly open up a new front in the India-China conflict.

Indian decision-makers should also reflect on the strategic rationale of the military-Quad. Unlike the U.S. and its Pacific partners, whose principal motivation in forming a maritime coalition is to implement a 'rules-based order' in the Indo-Pacific littorals, India's priority is to acquire strategic capabilities to counter a Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. While India has acquired airborne surveillance assets from the U.S., the Indian Navy is yet to develop the undersea capability to deter Chinese submarines in the eastern Indian Ocean. With U.S. defence companies hesitant to part with proprietary technology — in particular, vital anti-submarine warfare tech — the pay-off for New Delhi, in exchange for signing up the 'military-quad', is modest. Maritime watchers know cooperation with the U.S. and Japan without attendant benefits of strategic technology transfers will not improve the Indian Navy's deterrence potential in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

In operational terms also, it might be premature for Delhi to initiate multilateral engagement with Quad partners. With the strategic contest between the U.S. and China in East Asia and Southeast Asia hotting up, there is every possibility that the military-Quad will be used to draw India into the security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific. In recent days, China has stepped up its naval presence in the South China Sea, even as Washington directed three aircraft carrier groups — *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, *USS Nimitz* and *USS Ronald Reagan* — to the region, in a

seeming bid to counter the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The U.S. would expect its Indo-Pacific partners, including India, to assist the U.S. Navy in its South China Sea endeavour. Notably, neither Washington nor Tokyo believes China's threats in the Indian Ocean equal the challenges the PLAN poses in the Pacific. While they may engage in the occasional naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal, the U.S. and Japanese navies have little spare capacity for sustained surveillance and deterrence operations in the IOR. Australia, ironically, is the only one ready and able to partner India in securing the Eastern Indian Ocean.

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There is also the question of timing. A balancing coalition must come together when the nature and magnitude of the threat is wholly manifest. Again, it is worth pointing out that despite a growing presence in the Indian Ocean, the PLAN is yet to physically threaten Indian interests at sea. Chinese warships have not challenged Indian sovereignty in its territorial waters, or ventured close to Indian islands with malign intent. Nor have PLAN assets impeded the passage of Indian merchantmen in the regional sea lanes and choke points.

To the contrary, the Chinese Navy has avoided any entanglement with Indian naval ships in the subcontinental littorals, limiting its ventures to friendly countries in the region, many of which are happy to benefit from Beijing's economic and military power. Sure, Chinese research and intelligence ship presence close to the Andaman Islands has relatively expanded, but Chinese maritime agencies have gone about their task cautiously, ensuring that operations do not cross the threshold of conflict with India. This also means that the onus of the first move to precipitate a crisis in the Eastern Indian Ocean lies with the Indian Navy. Were the Indian Navy to combine with friendly forces to raise the ante in regional littorals, it would need to be ready for the consequences.

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The sobering reality for New Delhi is that naval coalition building alone will not credibly deter Chinese naval power in the Indian Ocean. Upgrading the trilateral Malabar to a quadrilateral, without acquiring the requisite combat and deterrence capability, could yield gains for India in the short term, but would prove ineffective in the long run. This is not to suggest that inviting Australia to join the Malabar is a bad idea; far from it. It is simply to posit that New Delhi should not sign up to quadrilateral engagement without a cost-benefit exercise and commensurate gains in the strategic-operational realm. What might appear politically sensible could be operationally imprudent.

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