

# A MISTAKE TO HAVE LEFT QUAD, SAYS AUSTRALIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

Australia should not have walked out of the Quad, and subsequently the Malabar exercises with India, but was “delighted” at New Delhi’s decision to invite it to participate in this year’s naval exercises in November, Australian High Commissioner to India Barry O’Farrell said.

Referring to his government’s announcement in 2008 that it would not participate in the Quad exercises with India, Japan and the United States, he said it probably became the reason India took three years to accept Australia’s request to rejoin the exercises, despite requests from 2017-2020.

“I can say that, with the benefit of hindsight, clearly that it [withdrawing from Malabar] was a mistake. I suspect earlier in the piece, that became a stumbling block, and that was not forgotten in terms of reassembling Australia as part of that exercise,” Mr. O’Farrell said in an interview to *The Hindu*.

Earlier this week, the Ministry of Defence announced that all four countries of the Quadrilateral would take part in the Malabar exercises scheduled at the end of November to be held in two phases on both sides of the Indian coastline in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. This will be the first such exercise after India signed logistical agreements with all Quad partners, and is expected to see greater interoperability and use of common military platforms.

## China’s protests

While Australia pulled out from the grouping a decade ago after China’s protests at the time, India’s hesitation in reinviting it back to the exercises in the past few years was also understood to be over China’s sensitivities over a possible “military alliance” in the Indo-Pacific ranged against it. However, experts believe that growing concerns in both countries over China’s aggression in the Indo-Pacific and on the border with India have accelerated the pace of Quad cooperation this year.

Asked if New Delhi’s turnaround this year was due to the stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and tensions with China, Mr. O’Farrell said that the decision was a reaction to “challenges in the neighbourhood” over a period of time, not the last few months.

“I don’t think the invitation came about because of activities over the last couple of months [at the LAC], I think it’s been the changing environment in which we live, and the recognition by countries like India and Australia, that they have to step up in the neighbourhood to deliver the sort of world we want,” he noted.

However, Mr. O’Farrell said Australia’s policy did not envision formalising the Quad in any way, contrary to statements from U.S. State Department officials, who called for formalising and regularising the interactions on the platform. He said that Australia did not see the Quad, as U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo asserted, as a “tool” to counter the challenge from China’s ruling Communist Party (CCP).

## Positive agenda

“We have a positive agenda for the Quad, which is about shaping the neighbourhood in which we live, you know, a free, open and resilient Indo-Pacific, one where, you know, rules and

norms apply and one where any disputes are resolved according to international law. It's been clear in the comments of the three foreign ministers, who are three-quarters of the Quad, that whatever we develop there is intended to be shared by all countries across the Indo Pacific, so we're not exclusivist," he stated.

India and Australia would continue talks on a trade deal, although they would be delayed until after the 15-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was completed later this year, which India decided to walk out from. Despite several requests from RCEP countries, especially Australia, the Modi government has refused to reconsider its decision, citing worries over Chinese goods flooding the Indian market.

"RCEP will proceed. I understand and recognise and respect India's decision, and no one is forced to sign up to the agreement. It's no secret that Australia was keen for India to be part of it. In the meantime, Australia will continue to engage with India bilaterally on a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA)," he said.

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