

## MALABAR 2017

by Lalit Kapur, Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group



The 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the week long Exercise Malabar ended on July 17, 2017, bringing to a close an annual event that has become one of the highlights of the Indian Navy's engagement with "friendly maritime forces in the Indian Ocean and beyond, through port visits, bilateral interactions,

training initiatives, operational exercises and technical support arrangements, in order to establish a cooperative framework that promotes mutual understanding and enhances security and stability in the region"<sup>1</sup>. Exercise Malabar inevitably attracts much media speculation about geopolitical realignments, strategic signalling and efforts at countering a rising China. How much of this is real and how much imagined is to be seen.

First, the event itself. The scale in Malabar 2017 was impressive, with USN presence including USS Nimitz with the embarked Carrier Air Wing 11, the Ticonderoga class cruiser USS Princeton, three Arleigh Burke class Destroyers with their embarked helicopters (USS Howard, Shoup and Kidd), one Los Angeles class nuclear submarine and one P8A LRMP aircraft. The JMSDF was represented by the brand new JS Izumo, described as a Helicopter Destroyer but actually a Helicopter Carrier, and JS Sazanami, a missile destroyer, both with SH-60K helicopters embarked. From the Indian Navy, participation included INS Vikramaditya with its embarked air wing, one Rajput class destroyer (INS Ranvir), two indigenously built Shivalik class frigates (although described as missile frigates, they were bigger than the Japanese missile destroyer), three indigenously built corvettes (two of the Kora class and one of the Kamorta class), one fleet tanker (INS Jyoti), one conventional submarine (INS Sindhudhvaj) and a P-8I LRMP aircraft<sup>2</sup>. The week-long event was divided into a harbour phase (10-13 July) and a sea phase (14-17 July). Concurrently, Special Forces and Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams from the USN and IN trained at INS Karna, the Indian Navy's new marine commando base, commissioned at Visakhapatnam just one year ago. A colourful opening ceremony on board INS Jalashwa at Chennai set the ball rolling, bringing personnel of the three navies together in an atmosphere of cordiality and bonhomie. The number of naval units

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**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh**  
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participating may not have been the largest ever, but was sufficient to overcome most navies. But more than the number of units, it is the institutional lessons learnt and wisdom gained that matters. These can and will be shared within the navies of participating nations.



Source: <http://indianexpress.com/photos/india-news/malabar-war-games-india-us-japan-bay-of-bengal-ins-vikramaditya-4745087/2/>

The sequence of interaction during Malabar can be divided into two. The first part, comprising the Harbour Phase, included subject matter expert and professional exchanges on carrier strike group operations, maritime patrol and reconnaissance operations, surface and anti-submarine warfare, helicopter operations, medical operations, damage control, explosive ordinance disposal, ship tours and Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS)<sup>3</sup>. The range of operations discussed is an indicator of the complexity of the exercise; it encompasses practically all significant aspects of blue water operations. The Sea Phase witnessed exercises involving surface and anti-submarine warfare, air defence, gunnery and missile warfare, mine warfare, communications, search and rescue and VBSS<sup>4</sup>. All these are significant aspects of gaining sea control, or denying use of the seas to an opponent. It also included deputing officers to witness operations from each other's ships, submarine familiarisation, high value unit defence, helicopter cross-deck evolutions, underway replenishment and ASW. As such, it provided an invaluable opportunity for the navies involved to learn from each other and share best practices.

The exercises could also be divided into two different types of operations. First are those designed to tackle non-conventional threats prevalent in peacetime, such as piracy and maritime terrorism. This is the comparatively easy part, as warships and the personnel on board can be expected to have overwhelming superiority in equipment and training as compared to the non-state actors who challenge them. The more complex part are exercises to tackle conventional challenges, including reconnaissance operations, surface, air and anti-submarine warfare, and defence against the variety of threats encountered at sea.

What is the objective of the Malabar exercises? Naval Exercises at the highest levels help navies to improve their operational capability. In the aftermath of the British withdrawal from East of Suez and India's turn towards the Soviet Union, the IN found

itself cut off from exchanges with other Navies at the very time it started to grow. Concepts and ideas for using the new equipment acquired were there in plenty, but how these would stack up to international exposure could not be tested. Exercising with others enables the IN to benchmark itself against frontline navies, to test itself against both the highly proficient navies with vast experience of maritime warfare and those of the less experienced, developing maritime nations. This means not only exposure to new concepts, tactics, doctrine and equipment, it also encompasses sharing of best practices, identification of weaknesses in own capability to tackle the multifarious challenges that exist at sea, and evolution of concepts to overcome such weaknesses. The exercises are, therefore, of immense value in building confidence in one's own capability.



Source: <http://asianewsservice.in/en/international/india-us-japan-to-begin-malabar-drills-today/>

At another level, the exercises enable development of interoperability, of sharing the burden of providing security to the maritime commons with others. The oceanic domain is vast and free. No one nation has either the capability or the right to exercise control over it. Ships of each nation have myriad differences, ranging from the nature of fuel used and food habits (which complicates logistics and ability to sustain at sea) to different procedures and different sizes of connectors, all of which complicate interoperability. Working with like minded nations to ensure continued security will always require rehearsal (i.e. joint exercises) to identify and overcome the myriad differences that exist, maximise strengths, overcome weaknesses and develop synergy. "Cooperation at sea involves not just ships going out together and carrying out exercises over a couple of days, but understanding the whys and wherefores"<sup>5</sup>.

One of the key enablers that would permit seamless communication between the participating navies in Malabar is, however, not in place. This is the COMCASA agreement, proposed by the United States well over a decade ago, that would allow Indian and American equipment to 'talk' to each other seamlessly, enabling net-centric warfare capability. Japan, as an American ally, has already signed this agreement. India needs to do the same, not as an ally, but as a strategic partner. The gains far outweigh any imagined costs. Bureaucratic and political skittishness has, however, prevented this agreement from being signed by India, even though indications are that the IN no longer has any inhibitions about COMCASA. Signing of the agreement will enable much more effective interoperability and needs to be vigorously pushed by India's Ministry of Defence.





Source: <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/tri-nation-malabar-naval-exercise-in-bay-of-bengal-begins.505839/>

At the strategic level, the exercise serves multiple purposes. The game of diplomacy is a highly complex one, with strategic trust and reliability among interlocutors always being in doubt. Lord Palmerstone's maxim of only interests being paramount<sup>6</sup> forms the only bedrock understood by all. Military capability is one of the key backbones on which international relations are built. For the participating nations, the exercise helps in building confidence and trust. For potential adversaries and those who see their vision as being challenged, it spells out the nature of opposition that may have to be overcome by its military, which is why such exercises always attract observation from potential antagonists<sup>7</sup>. These observations are intended to make an assessment of the capability achieved. Finally, for 'neutral' nations, the exercise could often indicate the direction in which the winds (of power) are blowing, in turn helping those on the fence to decide which side they will eventually support.

Multinational naval exercises of the Malabar variety are not uncommon. A bare month and a half before Malabar, the navies of USA, UK, France and Japan had participated in another amphibious exercise off Guam<sup>8</sup>. In 2017, the IN has participated in joint exercises with Australia (AUSINDEX 2017 off Fremantle in June), Singapore (SIMBEX 2017 off Singapore in May), and UK (KONKAN 2017 in the Atlantic). The IN also exercises with France, Russia, Indonesia, Oman and Sri Lanka, apart from conducting coordinated patrols with Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar. Nor is Malabar the only multi-national exercise the IN has participated in. Others include KOMODO 2016, ADMM Plus Exercises off Brunei and Singapore and IBSAMAR, with ships from India, Brazil and South Africa. Malabar, however, has developed into one that is a cut well above other exercises involving India. The growing complexity of the exercise will normally be observed closely by China, focused as it is on its rise as Asia's hegemon and already testing the limits of international resolve in areas like the East and South China Seas. The PLAN's assertions will inevitably expand to the Indian Ocean, of which the deployment of military personnel to the Chinese base in Djibouti is an unmistakable symptom.

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**References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Extract from “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”, Section on Guiding Principles, p vi
- <sup>2</sup> For details of participating ships, see <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-commences-bay-bengal-north-indian-ocean>
- <sup>3</sup> Sourced from USN Press Release, see <http://www.publicnow.com/view/718DF37DD5084D50E1FBF193E8D6853609C8272B?2017-07-14-17:00:13+01:00-xxx8181>
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> V Adm PS Das (Retd), “Why Malabar 2017 is Important”, sourced from <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/why-malabar-2017-is-important/20170715.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> Lord Palmerstone, then Britain’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, had famously said, “We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow” in the House of Commons, UK, on March 01 1848.
- <sup>7</sup> The means of observation are many, including electronic, submarines and ‘research vessels’.
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/hawaii/articles/2017-05-11/us-japan-france-uk-practice-amphibious-landings-on-guam>



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