



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Exercise Malabar Goes Down Under

Author

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Ships Participating in Ex Malabar 2023 in Formation off New South Wales, Australia, August 20, 2023.

Source: Australian Dept of Defence

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Joe Biden at the White House, June 21, 2023.

Source: MEA Photo Gallery

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Leaders of Pacific Island Countries in Papua New Guinea, May 22, 2023.

Source: MEA Photo Gallery

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Exercise Malabar Goes Down Under

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Exercise Malabar Goes Down Under

The 27th edition of Exercise Malabar, conducted off New South Wales from August 11-20, 2023 and hosted by Australia for the first time, speaks not just of Australia's changed outlook towards India as a security partner, but also the expansion of India's area of maritime interest. This brief seeks to assess the significance of the move of the exercise down under.

The Evolution of Exercise Malabar

The end of the Cold War necessitated India assuming a larger role in Indian Ocean security, including by strengthening professional contacts between the Indian Navy and navies of other friendly nations¹. The US, acknowledged as the world's foremost maritime power, was among the first nations to which India reached out. The US too was looking to rebuild a relationship with India, till then seen as firmly in the Soviet camp. Exercise Malabar began as a basic level periodic bilateral exercise with limited aims between the Indian Navy (IN) and the US Navy (USN), the first edition taking place off India's Malabar Coast, on May 28 & 29, 1992. Two more editions were conducted in the Arabian Sea before 1998, when the exercise was suspended following India's nuclear tests.

Malabar was reinstated in 2002; the venue remaining off India's West Coast. Exercise complexity increased gradually as the two partners developed mutual respect for each other's professional capability. The venue shifted outside the Indian Ocean for the first time in May 2007, to the Philippine Sea. Following then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "Confluence of the Seas" speech² to India's parliament and the first meeting of Quad officials, both in mid-2007, ships from the Australian, Japanese and Singapore navies joined the year's second edition of Exercise Malabar in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007.

Sharp questions from China resulted in Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, a known Sinophile looking to avoid endangering a vastly profitable economic relationship with China, making it clear that Australia would no longer

¹ MEA Annual Report 1992-93, <https://mealib.nic.in/?2521?000#Top>

² "Confluence of the Two Sea", Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

participate in the exercise in deference to China's sensitivities³. Kevin Rudd defended his decision⁴; its credibility is left to the reader to judge. Concomitantly, Japan saw the fall of the Abe government in September 2007. Japan's leaders who followed Abe before he was re-elected to office in December 2012 oversaw participation in Malabar editions held in Japanese waters in 2009 and Japan participated in 2014. The JMSDF did not, however, venture into the Indian Ocean during these years.

The venue for this once again India-US bilateral exercise alternated between the coasts of India and Japan (the base for forward deployed USN ships). In 2011, India and Japan agreed to conduct Exercise JIMEX; the first such exercise was conducted off Japan in January 2012⁵. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the US in 2014, he and then US President Barack Obama agreed to "upgrade their existing bilateral exercise Malabar"⁶. Shortly thereafter, the India-Japan relationship was upgraded to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership⁷. India invited Japan to participate in Malabar with the view of adding to their military engagement. Japan re-joined from the 18th edition, in 2015, and has remained a permanent member of Malabar since then.

India-Australia relations, which were set back following India's nuclear tests in 1998, received another jolt from Australia's walkout from Malabar in 2007 in deference to China. Kevin Rudd did visit India in November 2009, upgrading the bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership⁸ and concluding a declaration on security cooperation⁹. Maritime cooperation, however, was limited to constabulary functions. The October 2012 visit to India by his

³ Dhruva Jaishankar, "It's time to resuscitate the Asia-Pacific Quad", January 9, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/its-time-to-resuscitate-the-asia-pacific-quad/>

⁴ Kevin Rudd, "The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the Quad", March 26, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-Convenient-Rewriting-of-the-History-of-the-Quad>

⁵ "First Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in Indian Waters from 19-22 Dec", December 17, 2013, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=101825>

⁶ Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to USA, September 30, 2014, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/joint-statement-during-the-visit-of-prime-minister-to-usa/

⁷ Tokyo Declaration of India – Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, September 01, 2014, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23965/Tokyo+Declaration+for+India++Japan+Special+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership>

⁸ Joint Statement between India and Australia during visit of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, November 12, 2009, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5023/Joint_Statement_between_India_and_Australia_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_Kevin_Rudd

⁹ India-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation during visit of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, November 12, 2009, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5035/IndiaAustralia_Joint_Declaration_on_Security_Cooperation_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_Kevin_Rudd



successor, Julia Gillard, did little to enhance the scope¹⁰. It was only in September 2014 that India and Australia “welcomed preparations for the inaugural bilateral maritime exercise (AUSINDEX) to be held in 2015”¹¹ and decided to “conduct regular maritime exercises”¹².

The inaugural Exercise AUSINDEX took place off India’s east coast from September 11-19, 2015¹³. It did not result in Australia being re-invited to join Malabar despite actively seeking such an invitation. It was only when bilateral relations were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2020 and the shared vision for maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was enunciated that India invited Australia to participate in Exercise Malabar¹⁴ once again. Australia did so in the 24th edition of the exercise, conducted in two parts, in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, in November 2020¹⁵. This participation has now graduated to Australia hosting the exercise for the first time.

Malabar 2023

The exercise this year was on a somewhat smaller scale. The Indian Navy fielded IN ships Kolkata and Sahyadri, both indigenously designed and constructed frontline warships, and a P-8I Long Range Maritime Patrol (LRMP) aircraft¹⁶. Japan fielded JS Shiranui and a special boarding unit, noting that this was the 12th time the JMSDF was participating in the exercise¹⁷. The US fielded

¹⁰ Joint Press Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of Australia to India, October 17, 2012, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/20713/Joint_Press_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Australia_to_India

¹¹ Joint Statement by Prime Minister Abbott and Prime Minister Modi, visit to India September 2014, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-statement-by-prime-minister-abbott-and-prime-minister-modi-visit-to-india-september-2014>

¹² Joint Statement by Prime Minister Abbott and Prime Minister Modi, Brisbane, November 2014, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-statement-by-prime-minister-abbott-and-prime-minister-modi-brisbane-november-2014>

¹³ Indian and Australian Navy to Participate in Inaugural Bilateral Maritime Exercise ‘AUSINDEX-15’, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-and-australian-navy-participate-inaugural-bilateral-maritime-exercise-ausindex-15>

¹⁴ Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between The Republic of India and the Government of Australia, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-declaration-shared-vision-maritime-cooperation-indo-pacific-between-republic-india-and-government-australia>

¹⁵ Exercise MALABAR 2020 Concludes in the Arabian Sea, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-2020-concludes-arabian-sea>

¹⁶ Exercise MALABAR-23 concludes, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-23-concludes>

¹⁷ Japan-US-India-Australia Multilateral Exercise (MALABAR 2023) <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202308/20230808en.pdf>



USS Raphael Peralta, a P-8A aircraft and an SSN¹⁸, while Australia fielded HMAS Brisbane, HMAS Choules, a submarine, Four F-35A Lightning II fighters, two Hawk 127 aircraft and a P-8A. The absence of an aircraft carrier was notable, but Australian shore-based Hawks and F-35A Lightnings did enable exercising of the air element.

Political interest from Australia in the exercise was remarkable. Welcoming participants, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese described the exercise as an important opportunity for the ADF to partner and train with others, and as a statement of collaborative action and collective responsibility¹⁹. Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles said, "It is an honour to host Exercise Malabar for the first time here in Australia", while the Chief of the Royal Australian Navy said, "The Royal Australian Navy is honoured the Indian Navy has provided us the opportunity to host Exercise Malabar, reinforcing the trust and strength of our Navy-to-Navy relationship²⁰. HMAS Brisbane sailed out to lead the Quad fleet into Sydney²¹.

The Harbour Phase of the Exercise, from August 11-15, provided an opportunity not just for professional exchanges, but also for cross-deck visits of personnel to each other's ships, as well as sporting activities (including a cricket match) and cultural events. The sea phase, from August 16-21, included complex, high-intensity exercises in all domains of warfare, including live weapon firing²².

Australia's Security Outlook

The effusive and unprecedented welcome accorded by Australia to Indian ships participating in the exercise merits further consideration. Three years ago, an Australian strategist and the inaugural Director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute questioned India's commitment to East Asia and the Western Pacific and opined, "It is more likely to cut a deal with China to divide

¹⁸ Quad Alliance joins together for Exercise Malabar in Australia, <https://news.usni.org/2023/08/11/quad-alliance-joins-together-for-exercise-malabar-2023-in-australia>

¹⁹ Exercise Malabar Welcome Reception, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/exercise-malabar-welcome-reception>

²⁰ Australia to Host Exercise Malabar for the First Time, August 11, 2023, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-08-11/australia-host-exercise-malabar-first-time>

²¹ HMAS Brisbane leads international fleet into Sydney, August 11, 2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2023-08-11/hmas-brisbane-leads-international-fleet-sydney>

²² Malabar-2023 at Sydney, Australia, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/malabar-2023-sydney-australia>

the Indo-Pacific between them"²³. The opinion stemmed from disdain of India's growing maritime capability as well as Australia's 'Fear of Abandonment'²⁴. The flip side for Australian policymakers was continuing uncertainty regarding US commitment to the region. An Australian Foreign Minister (Julie Bishop) is on record as having said, "our closest ally and the world's most powerful nation is being seen as less predictable and less committed to the international order it pioneered ... the US is now favouring a more disruptive, often unilateral foreign trade policy that has hardened anxiety about its commitment to the rules-based order that it established, protected and guaranteed"²⁵.

The foundations of Australian foreign policy rest on external balancing through rich and powerful friends, supporting a rules-based order and engaging with the neighbourhood to create a favourable regional environment²⁶. The Biden administration has re-prioritised cementing alliances and partnerships, but Australia understands that the possibility of Trump or isolationism returning, and thus calling into doubt the external balancing needed for its security, is ever present.

Table I: Power Balances in Indo-Pacific²⁷

Country	GDP ²⁸ (\$Tn)	Mil Exp ²⁹ (\$Bn)	SSBN	SSN	SSK	CVN /CV	CG	DDG	FFG
China	19.4	298	6	9	56	2	6	36	95
Japan	4.4	53.9	-	-	22	2*	-	38	10
India	3.7	81	2	-	16	2	-	11	12
Australia	1.7	32.8	-	-	6	-	-	3	8
JAI³⁰	9.8	167.7	2	-	44	4	-	52	30
USA	26.9	811.6	14	49	-	11	16	74	26
Quad	36.7	979.3	16	49	44	15	16	126	56

²³ Hugh White, "Why India isn't going to save Australia from China's power", March 15, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/15/why-india-isnt-going-to-save-australia-from-chinas-power/>

²⁴ Allan Gyngell, "Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World Since 1942", <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/from-the-bookshelf-fear-of-abandonment-australia-in-the-world-since-1942/>

²⁵ Trump's men talk up 'rock-solid' US-Aussie relationship to Julie Bishop at AUSMIN meeting, July 25, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-25/donald-trump-pompeo-bishop-us-forces-darwin-ausmin-australia/10033172>

²⁶ Allan Gyngell, Op Cit.

²⁷ Author's compilation except where referenced.

²⁸ IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2023.

²⁹ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, December 2022

³⁰ Japan + Australia + India



Asia's power balance is heavily skewed towards China, as is evident from the table above. As a vast and resource rich but thinly populated nation in an increasingly adverse security environment, Australia has little choice but to depend on external partners for its own security. The change that has taken place is that while Australia has acted to keep the US engaged in its region, including through AUKUS³¹ and its updated Defence Strategic Review³², it has also stepped up its engagement of India as a parallel balancing track³³. A third string to the Australian bow, driven by balancing needs as well as the need for dispersion of allied assets within China's strike range, is provided by Australia's expanding defence partnership with Japan: their reciprocal access agreement came into effect while Malabar was in progress³⁴. Other foundational legs of its foreign policy, including the continued pursuit of the rules-based order and regional engagement, including with ASEAN and the PIF, have both received increased attention.

India's Expanding Maritime Vision

India's Maritime Security Strategy defined the primary area of security focus as the region north of the line stretching from the Cape of Good Hope (in South Africa) to Indonesia's Ombai-Wetar Straits³⁵. The rest of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific comprised the secondary area. This continues: the Indian Ocean and the SAGAR policy remain India's first priority. However, the interests of India, once described as 'sea blind', have also expanded in the Western Pacific, as is evident from the Act East Policy, high profile visits, the web of arrangements to extend reach and access with its partners in the region, the enhanced engagement (including maritime) with ASEAN, the strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Russia, the increase in IN ship deployments to the region, and the hosting of Malabar off Japan in alternate years.

³¹ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The AUKUS Alliance: Return to the Past", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/the-aukus-alliance-return-to-the-past.html> and "Deciphering AUKUS", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/the-aukus-alliance-return-to-the-past.html>

³² See Lalit Kapur, "Assessing Australia's Defence Strategic Review", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/assessing-australias-defence-strategic-review.html>

³³ See Lalit Kapur, "India and Australia: Partners for Indo-Pacific Security", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/india-and-australia-partners-for-indo-pacific-security-and-stability.html>

³⁴ Australia and Japan deepen defence ties, August 14, 2023, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-and-japan-deepen-defence-ties>

³⁵ Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy, October 2015, pp 34-35.



Similarly, increased political interaction, maritime engagement and the enhancement of the Malabar footprint reflect expansion of India's interests to the Southern Pacific. The political interest is evident from the first ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister to PNG and the FIPIC II Summit in May 2023³⁶, as well as the visit by the External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar to New Zealand in October 2022³⁷. Unlike in the past, India's political and diplomatic activities are being backed by naval engagement, generating confidence in India's capability. Examples are the visits by IN Ships Sahyadri and Kolkata to Port Moresby and Sydney in August 2023, going on to Auckland and Wellington early next month, as well as the first ever visit by an Indian submarine, INS Vagir to Fremantle, in Australia.

It would, however, be a stretch to believe that these interests will result in India's military engagement in the Western Pacific. India's vital interests, which it has committed to defend, lie on its continental borders and in the Indian Ocean. A peaceful periphery is important and India will certainly contribute to maintaining peacetime security in the Indo-Pacific. However, the prospect of India committing resources outside the Indian Ocean to help maintain US primacy remains as unlikely as the prospect of the US and its allies fighting alongside India in the Himalayas or the Indian Ocean. The best India can expect is professional, technological and intelligence cooperation, along with peacetime posturing. India must, therefore, prioritise building its own capacities and preserving primacy in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the best that the US and its regional allies can expect is diplomatic solidarity, measures to build confidence in the region's unaligned nations, and the provision of public goods.

What Malabar Represents

Exercise Malabar, in effect, demonstrates "the cooperation, shared values and collective ability of the participating nations to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific"³⁸, but not yet extending to mutual defence. The fact that an assertive China pursues its objectives through grey zone coercion and has not used military force against weaker neighbours can be attributed to the caution

³⁶ Prime Minister's departure statement ahead of his visit to Japan, Papua New Guinea and Australia, May 19, 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36558/Prime_Ministers_departure_statement_ahead_of_his_visit_to_Japan_Papua_New_Guinea_and_Australia

³⁷ Visit of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, to New Zealand and Australia (October 05-11, 2022), https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35779/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_New_Zealand_and_Australia_October_0511_2022

³⁸ Exercise Malabar 2023 Concludes, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-23-concludes>



engendered by the regional US-led power balance. Malabar and other exercises result in China having to factor in that India could be driven to strengthen this balance if pushed too far. In that event, India could act to cut China's lifelines passing through the Indian Ocean while China is engaged in a conflict in the Western Pacific. They can thus deter China and provide hope to smaller nations, preventing them from hopping on to the Chinese bandwagon.

The common membership of the Exercise Malabar and the Quad and the 2007 experience results in the two often being conflated. They are, nevertheless, different. Malabar represents an India-centric and generally successful US effort to draw India into contributing towards regional maritime security. So the US has been content to move at India's pace, helping strengthen India's capacity in the Indian Ocean while seeking to expand India's commitment in the Indo-Pacific. The expectation that India will one day join the US-led alliance system may remain, but US policy is realistic enough to understand that this is an uncertain prospect.

The Quad, on the other hand, is a diplomatic and geo-political partnership intended to generate alternatives to China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific, thus avoiding the creation of dependencies. It is more in keeping with India's ethos of shaping the environment, as compared to the security-led approach that the US normally adopts.

Both initiatives are US-formulated, but India-centric. They could combine at some future date, but for the present, they will remain independent of each other.

Conclusion

Quintessentially, Malabar remains an India-US exercise, with the scale of engagement dictated by India's comfort levels. It serves a useful purpose for India as well as the US and its allies. The media, particularly in the West, tends to portray it as an embodiment of US-led hard power. India, on the other hand, prefers to focus on the professional engagement and experience it brings, without commitments to hard balancing.

What does the future hold? If China continues with its aggressive assertions, the Quad could in fact move closer towards an alliance. In that case, Exercise Malabar will have provided solid foundations to strengthen their combined deterrence capability. If, on the other hand, China's approach moderates, Malabar and the Quad will remain independent of each other. China's actions thus hold the keys to the future.



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