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## CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND MALABAR EXERCISE

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The Naval forces of India, Japan and U.S. recently concluded the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of their annual drills known as *Malabar Exercise* from 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> July 2017. The aim of the exercise is to achieve better military understanding and interoperability between the three partnering nations. This exercise demonstrates the joint commitment of all three countries to address common maritime challenges, security of Indo-Pacific, and enhancement of global maritime security. MALABAR-17 which held in the Bay of Bengal featured 95 aircraft, 16 ships and two submarines was one of the biggest ever since its inception in 1992.<sup>1</sup> INS Vikramaditya (India's sole aircraft carrier), USS Nimitz (world's largest aircraft carrier), and Japan's biggest helicopter carrier JS Izumo along with many warships participated in MALABAR-17.

Though initially started as a bilateral exercise between India and U.S. in 1992, Japan became the permanent partner country for MALABAR in 2015. Other than Japan, Australia

and Singapore also participated in the past (2007) as non-permanent members. Three exercises were concluded until the suspension by the U.S. in 1998 in the wake of India's nuclear test. However, George W. Bush led government in the U.S. restarted the exercise in 2002 after the 9/11 incident. Malabar-07 was held off the coast of Okinawa, Japan (first time outside the Indian Ocean), and Japan participated in this annual event along with Australia, and Singapore for the first time.<sup>2</sup> Japan participated in Malabar 2009, 2011 and 2014 before joining as a permanent member in 2015.

Japan is an all weather ally of U.S. and has regular exercises with the U.S. Navy. India-U.S. relations have grown significantly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and India is an important part of Barack Obama's "Pivot to China." That helped in closer ties between India-Japan. The year 2007 was a turning point for India-Japan relations. It was in 2007 that Japanese PM Shinzo Abe gave "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech in the

Indian Parliament. In this speech, Shinzo Abe said that, “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A “broader Asia” that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability and the responsibility to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency.”<sup>3</sup> Since then India-Japan relations have grown not only in the economic arena but also at the strategic level. India’s growing closeness with Japan was the reason when after inviting Japan as an observer in 2009, 2011 and 2014, India and U.S. decided to include Japan as a permanent member of Malabar exercise in 2015. In the present environment, a sound India-Japan partnership is indispensable.

China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is perceived as a threat to freedom of navigation in one of the most important trade route that passes through Malacca Strait. The underlying message of this Malabar exercise is also to show that U.S., Japan, and India are well connected and support freedom of navigation.

China’s ever-increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) is something that India does not want to overlook. Since December 2013, China has regularly deployed its conventional and nuclear submarines to the IOR. Deepening of China’s maritime links with Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Myanmar,

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Cambodia shows growing Chinese presence in the IOR, which is also a major concern for India.<sup>4</sup> Malabar exercise is significant to demonstrate India’s strength in the IOR.

China also played a factor in India’s decision of not including Australia in MALABAR-17. Australia only participated in 2007 as an observer. However, since then this exercise is only limited to India, U.S. and Japan. The reason cited by scholars is that India does not want to give the wrong signal to China. In 2007, Australia’s participation irked China, and it raised concerns about the quadrilateral engagement. Since then Australia did not participate in the drills. However, this year Australia showed interest in joining as an ‘observer’, but India declined this request. This time also China factor played a part in that decision.<sup>5</sup> India wants to avoid any unnecessary tension, and this stance of India (of not including Australia) also shows its clear intention that India by performing these exercises is not ‘ganging up’ against China. Moreover, Navies of India and Australia already concluded their bilateral naval drills called as “AUSINDEX” between 13 to 17 June 2017 off the coast of Fremantle, Western Australia.

The significance of Malabar exercise can be summed up in the following points:

- To help in the advancement of the understanding between the sailors of the participating nations.
- The stability of IOR is necessary for India, and Malabar exercise is significant in creating the stable environment in IOR.
- This exercise also helps in solidifying relations between participating nation. India-Japan relationship came a long way from having a receiver-donor relationship to reach the current level of strategic partnership. This exercise makes the bond stronger.
- The U.S. hegemony in territorial waters worldwide is being challenged by China. With this exercise, U.S. is continuously reminding to China to rein in its expansionist behaviour, and the U.S. has found a partner in India to balance China.

<sup>4</sup> Bagchi, Indrani. "China's presence creating anxiety in Indian Ocean Region: US." *Times of India*. May 6, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chinas-presence-creating-anxiety-in-indian-ocean-region-us/articleshow/58538469.cms>. Accessed August 10, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, Helen. "WHY DID INDIA REBUFF AUSTRALIA'S WAR GAMES OFFER (IF NOT TO PLACATE CHINA)?" *SCMP*. June 04, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2096699/why-did-india-rebuff-australias-war-games-offer-if-not-placate>. Accessed August 02, 2017.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Exercise Malabar commences in Bay of Bengal/ North Indian Ocean." *Indian Navy*. July 31, 2017, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-commences-bay-bengal-north-indian-ocean>. Accessed August 01, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "Malabar 07-01." *Bharat Rakshak*. September 09, 2007, <http://www.bharatrakshak.com/NAVY/Galleries/Bridges/2007/Malabar0701/>. Accessed August 01, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Abe, Shinzo. "'Confluence of the Two Seas" Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India." *MOFA*. August 22, 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed August 02, 2017.