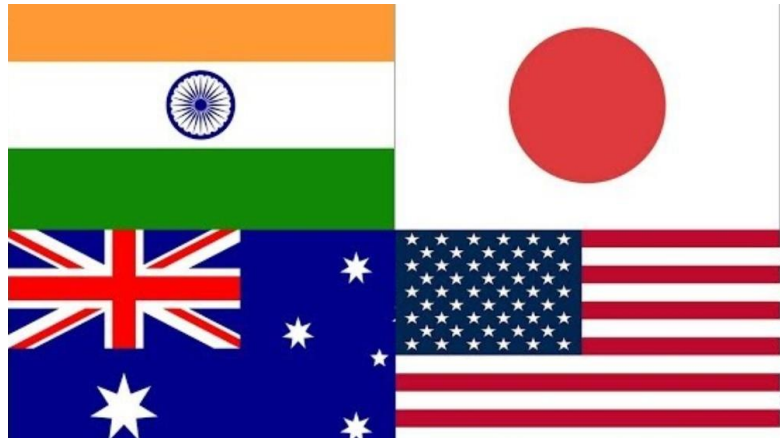




Make the right call on 'Malabar' going Quad

Context:

- There have been reports that India could soon invite Australia to join the Malabar naval exercises to be held later in 2020.
- According to reports, a key meeting 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.
- The move to include Australia would mark a **major shift for India's Indo-Pacific plans**.
- Inclusion of Australia would make it the first time since 2007 that all members of Quad will participate in a joint military drill, aimed apparently at China.



What are the major concerns?

- The article argues that the benefits or gains for India in the strategic-operational realm would be limited as compared to the cost of participating in the quadrilateral engagement.
- **New conflict point:** China has long opposed QUAD coalition and the Chinese leadership sees the **maritime quadrilateral as an Asian-NATO that seeks only to contain China's rise**.
- 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 China. At a time when India and China are negotiating a truce on the border in Eastern Ladakh, India's invitation to Australia to participate in the Malabar exercise sends contrary signals to China.
- China would view the move by India as a pressure tactic on China and a move aimed at expanding India's sphere of influence into the entire Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.



- This move **could invite retaliatory moves by China**. China could respond through **aggressive posturing in the Eastern Indian Ocean**, which could lead to the opening up of a new front in the India-China conflict.
- **Modest gains:** India's priority for the Indian Ocean region is to acquire strategic capabilities to counter a Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean.
- Though India possesses airborne surveillance capabilities, the Indian Navy is yet to develop the undersea capability to deter Chinese submarines in the eastern Indian Ocean.
- U.S. defence companies have been hesitant to part with proprietary technology related to vital anti-submarine warfare technology. 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).
- Notably, neither the U.S. nor Japan believes China's threats in the Indian Ocean equal the challenges China 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.
- **Naval coalition-building alone may 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.
- **Strategic autonomy:** The strategic contest between the U.S. and China in East Asia and Southeast Asia has been increasing.
- In recent days, China has stepped up its naval presence in the South China Sea, even as the U.S. has 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).
- In such a scenario, there is every possibility that the military-Quad will be used to draw India into the security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific. The U.S.



would expect its Indo-Pacific partners, including India, to assist the U.S. Navy in its South China Sea endeavour.

- **Premature move:** There are concerns that it might be premature for Delhi to initiate multilateral engagement with Quad partners.
- A balancing coalition must come together when the nature and magnitude of the threat are wholly manifest.
- The article argues 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. Nor have PLAN assets impeded the passage of Indian merchantmen in the regional sea lanes and chokepoints.
- The article argues that choosing to up the ante would only **precipitate a crisis in the Eastern Indian Ocean** and would have retaliatory moves from China.

What are the counter-arguments?

- Many Indian defence and strategic issues experts have welcomed the development, hailing it as a long-overdue move. Some experts have argued that the **rationale for a quartet and perhaps the inclusion of more nations in future Malabar exercises has never been stronger**.
- **Chinese presence in IOR:** China has also been involved in **deployments, exercises and military hardware relationships with an increasing number of nations in the “Indo-Afro-Pacific”** which can neither be ignored nor left bereft of counter-measures.
- Chinese research and **intelligence ship presence close to the Andaman Islands** has relatively expanded.
- **Chinese assertiveness: Appeasing China has been counter-productive.** In fact, China has been accused of increasing assertiveness in its actions.
- 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**. An alliance with the U.S., Japan and Australia to counter Chinese moves in the Indian Ocean could help in this direction.



- Expanded Malabar participation points to the emergence of a structured maritime coalition in the Indo-Pacific, amounting to an **emergent defence maritime architecture vis-à-vis a revisionist China**. It is an indication of resistance to any aggressive posturing and change in status quo in the region.
- The quadrilateral dialogue that includes Australia can have meaning only when it is ready to take robust steps that include military-operational potential.
- **Deepening alliances:** The move will allow India to bolster its security and defence mechanisms by synergizing ties with countries that have a **converging Indo-Pacific outlook**, namely its Quad partners.
- Considering that **Australia also shares similar security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region** as India in the present context, its inclusion would be a pragmatic decision.
- **Australia's role:** Australia's inclusion in the Malabar naval exercises would strengthen not only the maritime perspectives shared by India and Australia but also their **cooperative vision in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.
- Involving **Australia, a two-ocean maritime power with** competence in the South Pacific, will strengthen the interoperability of the Quad navies and **allow maritime domain awareness** to emerge as a major point of cooperation between India and Australia.
- **Maritime security: The IOR is fast becoming one of the most crucial geopolitical and economic areas of the world** and there has been a rise in security concerns. The Indo-Pacific region holds immense **geo-political and geo-strategic significance** for navies around the world.
- Expanded participation in Malabar will help strengthen regional maritime security arrangement in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The primary aim of the exercise is to increase interoperability amongst the navies as well as develop a common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations. The exercise is a demonstration of the joint commitment of the nations to address common maritime challenges across the spectrum of operations and will go a long way in enhancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region for the **benefit of the global maritime community**.

21.07.2020

Tuesday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

Conclusion:

- There is the need for careful thought on India's moves with respect to the quadrilateral engagement. India should **reflect on the strategic rationale of the military-Quad**.
- There should be a **cost-benefit exercise** and any move should lead to commensurate gains in the strategic-operational realm for India.