

India's Malabar Dilemma

HARSH V PANT AND ANANT SINGH MANN

ABSTRACT Speculations are rife about India possibly inviting Australia for the next Malabar naval exercise—which COVID-19 has caused to be moved to 2021.¹ If true, this would represent a break from the past and signal a change in the Asian strategic environment. Over the past few years, India has consistently resisted including Australia in the exercise, despite the latter's willingness. The only other time that Australia was included in the Malabar exercises, along with Singapore and Japan, was in 2007.² This brief examines the debate around Malabar in the context of the evolving Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral or Quad. It argues that New Delhi's possible inclusion of Canberra in the next Malabar exercise would not only represent a logical progression of an Indian foreign policy shift amidst structural changes in the region, but also a signal to the world that India is willing to play the role it perceives for itself in both the global and regional stage.

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A HESITANT BEGINNING

The United States (US) and India instituted the annual Malabar exercises in 1992.³ Following the diplomatic fallout of India's nuclear tests of 1998, the frequency of the bilateral exercises dwindled, only regaining their regularity after 2004 (See Table 1). In 2007 the bilateral accord expanded its scope to include other key Asian states like Australia, Japan and Singapore. More importantly, in the same year, the US, Japan, Australia and India converged in the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' (or Quad).⁴ Beijing protested the accord, calling it an "Anti-China coalition".⁵

What would later be known as Quad 1.0 lost its momentum soon after its inception as Australia withdrew, and sought to instead prioritise its relationship with China.⁶ Australia's Minister for Defence Brendon Nelson stated in July 2007 that he had "reassured China that [the] so-called

security quadrilateral dialogue with India is not something we are pursuing."⁷ Soon after, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—a champion of the Quad—resigned in September 2007.⁸ The US in December 2007 then declared that it was prioritising its trilateral engagement with Japan and Australia, over the new quadrilateral initiative.⁹ For its part, New Delhi's principle of strategic autonomy made it sceptical of such an arrangement, viewing it as a threat to policy manoeuvrability.

While Quad 1.0 was essentially put on the backburner over the following decade, India-US engagement continued with the bilateral Malabar exercises taking place annually (See Table 1). It was not until 2015 that the Malabar exercises elevated Japan's status as a 'permanent member'.¹⁰ China again vehemently protested this trilateral engagement and said that "relevant countries should not provoke confrontation and create tension in the region."¹¹

Table 1: Participants, location and duration of Malabar Exercises, 1992-2020

Year	Participants	Location	Duration
1992	India-USA	Off India's West Coast	1 day
1995	India-USA	Persian Gulf	1 day
1996	India-USA	Off Kochi	2 days
2002 ¹²	India-USA	Arabian Sea	4 days
2003	India-USA	Off Kochi	3 days
2004	India-USA	Off Goa	8 days
2005	India-USA	Off Kochi	8 days
2006	India-USA	Off Goa	11 days
2007, April	India-USA	Philippine Sea	4 days
2007, Sept.	India-USA-Japan-Australia-Singapore	Bay of Bengal	6 days
2008	India-USA	Arabian Sea	10 days
2009	India-USA-Japan	Off Okinawa	6 days
2010	India-USA	Off Goa	7 days
2011	India-USA	Off Okinawa	5 days

Year	Participants	Location	Duration
2012	India-USA	Bay of Bengal	7 days
2013	India-USA	Off Vishakhapatnam	6 days
2014 ¹³	India-USA-Japan	Off Nagasaki	6 days
2015 ¹⁴	India-USA-Japan	Bay of Bengal	6 days
2016 ¹⁵	India-USA-Japan	Philippine Sea	4 days
2017 ¹⁶	India-USA-Japan	Bay of Bengal	8 days
2018 ¹⁷	India-USA-Japan	Off the coast of Guam	10 days
2019 ¹⁸	India-USA-Japan	Off the coast of Japan	9 days
2020 ¹⁹ /2021 ^a	India-USA-Japan-Australia ^b	Bay of Bengal ^c	-

Over the past decade, as the Indo-Pacific region faced increasing security challenges, the Quad states have also heightened their congruity in foreign policy. Their shared issues include terrorism, maritime piracy, and more importantly, threats to the rules-based order underlying a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'.²⁰ More pertinently, the 'China factor'—which was key to the failure of Quad 1.0 to take off—just a decade later appears to be serving as the pivot around which the Quad 2.0 minilateralism²¹ is seeking a rejuvenation. In the decade since 2007, a rising Chinese belligerence in its land and maritime disputes, the increasingly questionable intent of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) programme, and its related debt trap diplomacy have only further upended the thesis of a "peacefully rising and status-quoist China".²² Consequently, Australia, India, Japan and the US have sought to breathe new life into their Quad; Quad 2.0 has met biannually at a senior official level

since 2017, and was subsequently upgraded to the ministerial level in 2019.²³

At its core, Quad 2.0 aims to maintain regional maritime stability by ensuring a Free and Open Indo-Pacific under the norms of the rules-based global order. Security issues including terrorism, cyber and maritime arenas have consistently been amongst the priority in the agendas of their meetings (See Table 2). Moreover, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad held a virtual meeting—which included other countries like Vietnam, New Zealand and South Korea—to strengthen inter-state coordination in mitigating the impact of the pandemic. The agenda of that meeting included issues of vaccine development, repatriation of overseas citizens, and the economic fallout of COVID-19.

However, while they have met twice in November 2017, three times in 2018,

a The 2020 Malabar exercises will likely be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

b Potential inclusion of Australia in Malabar 2020.

c Expected location of Malabar 2020.

and again twice in 2019, the Quad has not issued any joint statement following any of these meetings.²⁴ The four have only released independent press statements of their perceptions of the outcomes of these meetings.²⁵

R. G. Buchan and B. Rimland make the observation that since the meeting in November 2018, Quad 2.0 has emphasised on the continued importance of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in maintaining regional maritime stability.²⁶ This implies that the minilateral does not intend to undermine or supersede the functions of the multilateral ASEAN.²⁷

A POTENTIAL RENEWAL?

Quad 2.0, much like its first iteration, has suffered because of lack of both coherence and purpose. This is partly because New

Table 2: Quad 2.0 Meetings, 2017-2020

No.	Date	Location	Agenda	Level
1.	2017, November ²⁸	Manila	Denuclearisation of North Korea, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, protection of rules based order	Assistant Secretary Level
2.	2018, January ²⁹	New Delhi	Free and Open Indo-Pacific, protection of rules based order, China's disruption in Indo-Pacific	Senior Official Level
3.	2018, June ³⁰	Singapore	Free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region	Senior Official Level
4.	2018, November ³¹	Singapore	Free, open, rules-based and inclusive order in the Indo-pacific region that fosters trust and confidence. Confirmed importance of ASEAN in regional stability	Senior Official Level
5.	2019, September ³²	New York	Topics included disaster relief assistance, airtime and cybersecurity security cooperation, finance and counterterrorism. Reconfirmed importance of ASEAN in regional stability	Ministerial Level
6.	2019, November ³³	Bangkok	Continued discussions from New York meet. In addition included connectivity and infrastructure development and security cooperation in the maritime, cyber and terrorism spheres.	Senior Official Level
7.	2020, March ³⁴	<i>Virtual Meeting</i>	<i>Quad-plus</i> - Inclusion of New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea, Coordinate efforts to counter Covid-19, Vaccine development, repatriation, global economy	Senior Official Level

Delhi has been working to reset its relations with China under the carefully constructed 'Wuhan Spirit', since the de-escalation of the two-month-long standoff between the two countries in mid-2017 at the border trijunction in Doklam.³⁵ New Delhi's post-Doklam adjustment went so far as to even cancel all rallies of the Dalai Lama and visibly step back from its pro-Tibet stand.³⁶

Australia, the only member of Quad 2.0 which has not been part of the Malabar exercises since 2007, has for the last few years been regularly courting India for an invitation. New Delhi has consistently refused, for various reasons. Some analysts point to what they refer to as a "trust deficit" between India and Australia,³⁷ owing to the latter's ambiguity regarding its relationship with China, driven in turn by its strategic interests.³⁸ Other observers have alluded to New Delhi's continued endeavour to delink the Quad arrangement from the Indo-Pacific.³⁹ More specifically, it has been suggested that including Australia in the next Malabar exercises would weaponise the Quad. These same analysts argue that conflating the Quad with the Indo-Pacific might unnecessarily provoke China into opening up a new front in the eastern Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where China has so far avoided direct naval confrontation with India.⁴⁰ New Delhi should therefore do a careful calculation before it commits itself to a geopolitical framework that effectively further ostracises China, as a mere naval alliance will not substitute for the required technology transfer that will enhance India's

deterrence capabilities in the IOR.⁴¹

Nonetheless, since 2015, Indo-Australian relations have strengthened, with the first bilateral maritime exercise AUSINDEX held in Vishakhapatnam.⁴² The exercises were again held in 2017, off the coast of Freemantle, and in 2019 in the Bay of Bengal.⁴³ This new generation of Indo-Australian relations has been largely underpinned by the pragmatism of mutual interest.

Most recently, in a virtual summit in June this year, New Delhi upgraded its relationship with Canberra to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership",⁴⁴ with agreements over a range of areas including science, infrastructure, terrorism, trade and defence. In defence, the 'Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement' was signed, providing the two countries access to each other's ports and bases.⁴⁵ They also signed a Memorandum of Understanding to enhance collaboration between their defence technology and research organisations.

With the steadily growing Indo-Australian interlinkages over the last half a decade or so, it now seems logical for India to take the leap and expand the Malabar from a trilateral to a quadrilateral initiative, and include Australia in the next exercise. This would necessarily conflate the military context from the Malabar exercise with the security framework of the Quad 2.0, providing the much-needed teeth to the Quadrilateral arrangement.

A 'WEAPONISED' QUAD

The next Malabar exercise will gain greater significance if Australia is indeed included. It will bring to the forum a renewed willingness to enhance diplomatic and economic coordination in the hope that it will lead eventually to a stronger military alliance. The Quad will then be in a position to address each member state's strategic vulnerabilities, essentially bringing closer the prospect of a 'weaponised' Quad. Japan's strategic competition with China, especially regarding the disputed Senkaku islands south of Japan, has flared up since the beginning of the decade due to differing historiographies and competition over the islands' natural resources.⁴⁶ However, Japan still brings to the table considerable capital and economic support which make up for its constitutionally limited military capabilities. While Tokyo has made an active effort to modernise its capabilities—including the upgrade of two self-defence force ships to fit in the F-35 stealth fighters—its ability to protect its interests in the larger Indo-Pacific region remains dependent on its alliances.⁴⁷

Today, India's fundamental vulnerabilities stem from its geographical contiguity with its northern neighbours, Pakistan and more specifically, China with which it shares a 3,488-kilometre-long⁴⁸ undefined border. The frequent Sino-Indian border standoffs and the more recent skirmish at the Galwan Valley⁴⁹ are symptoms of what is increasingly becoming a zero-sum Sino-Indian relationship. Beijing's remarkable economic development and its associated military modernisation has only widened

the gap between the military capabilities of China and India.

Notwithstanding this, China's growing influence through OBOR and its expanding presence in the Indian Ocean Region have only heightened anxiety in New Delhi's strategic circles.⁵⁰ In response, India is modernising its capabilities, focusing on protecting its interests in the maritime domain. However, as it protects its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region, New Delhi's scope of contribution is comparatively limited in the larger Indo-Pacific region.⁵¹

The US, meanwhile, has gone a step further with its growing discourse of a new cold war with China, blaming Beijing for trade malpractices, economic espionage,⁵² and its expansionist policies in its neighbourhood. However, being the world's most powerful tech investor,⁵³ the US still retains the world's foremost military capabilities with its leading maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific. While analysts have pointed out the possibility in the future of a receding US influence in the Indo-Pacific, heightened military and economic cooperation amongst the Quad partners would maintain the US' influence by burden-sharing maritime responsibilities.⁵⁴

Australia has also become increasingly sceptical of not only its economic overdependence on Beijing, but also Beijing's rising influence in Australian politics.⁵⁵ To counter this fear of a 'weaponised interdependency',⁵⁶ Australia has propagated its 'Pacific Set-up' strategy which aims to expand its military and

economic interaction in its neighbourhood by providing infrastructure financing and export financing mechanisms worth around AU\$3 billion to bolster the economies in its neighbourhood.⁵⁷

The currently escalating Sino-US rhetoric of a 'Cold War' and the potential transition of the international order into a multipolar system could conceivably strengthen cooperation within the Quad 2.0. At the same time, the increasing collaboration also appears to be a result of a gradual unification of wider interests amongst the four member states. Moreover, there is a possibility that this four-member grouping might see the participation of other major regional players.

While the Malabar exercises could perhaps create a template for future Quad 2.0 interactions, what remains contentious is the level of actual military assistance this 'weaponised' Quad would provide its member states in the event of Chinese aggression or local conflict. This question remains unanswered especially in the light of increasing US isolationism and its rhetoric of calling on regional stakeholders to shoulder more responsibility. What becomes exceedingly clear is that keeping with the historical trajectory of the Quad grouping, unless there are rapid changes in the extent of military coordination and technology dissemination amongst its members, the Quad will find it difficult to evolve from its present-day avatar as a soft balancing tool against regional bullying.

Although the Quad's present functions of enhancing interoperability,

bolstering intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance proficiencies remain foundational in any military coordination,⁵⁸ its members should actively cooperate to build each other's economic, technological and military capabilities to counter China. Without this enhancement, the Quad's goals—maintaining Indo-Pacific stability, challenging regional bullying, strengthening economic independence, and protecting the free and open Indo-Pacific under the rules-based order—will remain a distant dream.

CONCLUSION

Australia's possible participation in the next Malabar exercises would come as a natural result of a progression in bilateral diplomatic relations, coupled with the compulsions driven by ongoing strategic shifts in the Indo-Pacific region. While threats to regional security have heightened in recent times, it would be an oversimplification to attribute the current strengthening of Quad 2.0 ties entirely to the decline of Sino-Indian relations. More pertinently, although Australia's addition would indeed send a strong message to China—as India exhibits to the world its desire to play the role it perceives for itself—New Delhi should also work on securing real naval technology transfers to enhance its actual deterrence capabilities in IOR.

The growing instability in the international order, including the weakening of US influence in the Indo-Pacific, makes a stronger case for the protection of the global commons. While the level of

future integration depends on a variety of evolving domestic and international factors, what is certain is that with the potential inclusion of Australia in Malabar and an enhanced commitment to this alignment

of democracies, Quad 2.0 would perhaps cease being disregarded. The Quad would increasingly be able to prove itself beyond being merely a “foam in the Ocean, destined to dissipate soon.”⁵⁹ 

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Prof. Harsh V Pant is Director of Studies and Head of Strategic Studies Programme at ORF. **Anant Singh Mann** is a Research Intern at ORF.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005.
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org