

India invites Japan for naval exercises with US

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In a clearly provocative move against China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invited Japan to join the annual India-US naval war games. Known as the “Malabar exercises,” the war games are to be held in the Bay of Bengal, the northeastern arm of the Indian Ocean, in October.

This decision of the Indian government to make the naval exercises trilateral has been clearly encouraged by Washington as part of its aggressive “pivot” to Asia—that is, the military encirclement of China in preparation for war.

The Malabar exercises have been held annually since 1992, except for a four-year suspension by the US because of Indian nuclear bomb tests in 1998. The US resumed them in 2002, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

On the invitation of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, Japan, Australia and Singapore participated in those annual exercises in 2007. That led to strong diplomatic opposition from China, and India did not repeat the invitation to Japan until this year.

The Indian and Japanese navies conducted their first bilateral maritime exercises in December 2013 in the Indian Ocean. While forging bilateral military-strategic ties with both the US and Japan, India has sought to avoid being a part of a US-led alliance in the region against China.

After dragging its feet for several years, New Delhi’s decision to invite Japan for trilateral navy exercises highlights India’s closer alignment with the US’ strategic agenda following Modi’s coming to power. The US has been working to expand its trilateral alliance with Japan and Australia against China by adding India, making the alliance in the Asian-Pacific region a quadrilateral.

As part of that effort, Washington has encouraged India to take a more assertive role in the South China Sea where Beijing has territorial disputes with US allies like

Vietnam and the Philippines. India is also involved in joint oil exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea, over Beijing’s objections.

Speaking August 24 at the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, US ambassador in India Richard Verma said that the upcoming Malabar games would be the “most complex naval exercise we’ve executed together, with a US carrier strike group, a submarine, and a P-8 [an aircraft designed for long-range anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions] exercising together with an Indian destroyer, frigate, oiler, and its own P-8.”

Since Modi’s coming to office in May last year, the Obama administration has intensified its efforts for integrating India closer into its strategic agenda against China, and Modi has responded by tilting New Delhi ever closer towards Washington. During Obama’s Indian visit last January, Modi’s agreement on the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean marked deeper integration into the US “pivot” against China.

India also collaborated with the US in the regime-change operation in Sri Lanka last January, in the presidential election which ousted Mahinda Rajapakse, who had developed close ties with China, installing instead Maithripala Sirisena, who is committed to fixing Colombo firmly into Washington’s strategic orbit.

Underlining the development of closer military ties with the US, the Indian air force will participate in joint air exercises codenamed Red Flag, hosted by the US next April at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, after an absence of six years.

India has also been developing closer relations with Japan and Australia. In June, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar met with his Australian counterpart and the Japanese vice foreign minister.

Indian analyst Harsh V. Pant welcomed this trilateral alliance in an article titled “Asia’s new geo-politics”, published in *Deccan Herald* on August 11. He said, “Uncertainty of Chinese power and intentions in the region as well as of future American commitment to maintaining the balance of power in Asia ranks high in the strategic thinking of regional powers. Rapidly evolving regional geopolitics is forcing Asia’s middle powers—India, Japan and Australia—to devise alternative strategies for balancing China.”

Encouraged by India’s decision to invite Japan for the Malabar exercises, Australia is urging New Delhi to consider quadrilateral military exercises. During a visit to India this week, Australian Defence Minister Kevin Andrews expressed Canberra’s interest in joining naval exercises with the US, India and Japan. In response to a question during an address at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi on September 2, Andrews said: “If quadrilateral opportunities arise, we would be inclined to be part of those exercises.”

The Indian and Australian navies will start their first-ever joint maritime exercise, AUSINDEX, on September 11 off India’s Visakhapatnam port in the Bay of Bengal. Highlighting how Australia is working to deepen its military ties with India, Andrews added: “Gradually we will expand the range of exercises. We are looking at air force to air force and army to army exercises over the next year or two.”

Japan, which has been developing military-strategic ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific region to contain China’s influence, is clearly eager to take part in the trilateral naval games with the US and India. In preparation for the October exercises, military officials from the three countries met at the US navy base in Yokosuka close to Tokyo on July 22.

The Modi government’s increasing tilt towards the US was also noted by Jeff Smith, a South Asia specialist at the American Foreign Policy Council: “I’d view aircraft carrier participation in this year’s drill as yet another signal from the Modi government that it was shedding the (previous) government’s anxiety about a more overt balancing posture toward China and a more robust strategic embrace of the U.S. and Japan.”

China’s elite has reacted cautiously to India’s decision to invite Japan for joint naval exercises. Zhou Bo, an honorary fellow at the Beijing-based Academy of Military Science, commented: “India alone cannot assure the security of the Indian Ocean, even if it regards (it) as its backyard and wishes no one to compete with it there.” He

added: “If the Pacific Ocean is big enough to accommodate China and the US, so is the Indian Ocean to accommodate India and China.”

Beijing feels encircled by Washington’s “pivot” and thus tries to avert direct confrontation with the US and also to prevent India from fully integrating into the US strategic orbit.

Confronted by US-led military encirclement with a possible sea blockade of much of its trade through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean in any conflict, Beijing has been actively involved in developing an alternate route for its trade, including import of oil and raw materials for industries. Particularly, India’s close line-up with the US has left China the option of turning to Pakistan for helping to secure its economic lifelines.

The Modi government, in order to assert its regional hegemony and with the ambition of growing as a world power with the “promised” support of the US, is spending billions of dollars on new weapons and weapons-systems. Indian analyst Punit Saurabh wrote to *USNI News*, pointing to New Delhi’s aims of countering China in recent building of its military prowess, “India has steadily given a go-ahead to \$40 billion investment in defense invigoration including construction of 6 nuclear subs, a mountain division of 60,000 trained soldiers, bases in India and outside, all of it aimed to checkmate the Chinese tactics.”

India’s decision for trilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean is aggravating tensions with China, with dangerous consequences. As the WSWS has repeatedly warned, the growing tensions between India and Pakistan and India and China have taken a more catastrophic turn with intensification of the US-China conflict. Given that all the states involved are nuclear armed, any eruption of military conflict would threaten the destruction of the vast numbers of people in the region and beyond.



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