

Indian-US-Japanese naval exercises in Indian Ocean target China

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18 July 2017

The 10-day Malabar naval exercises by India, US and Japan in the Bay of Bengal, which concluded yesterday, underscore how far the US-led strategic alliance involving India and Japan, directed against China, has developed. This is the third consecutive year Japan has joined the annual war games as a permanent partner.

Sailors and marines from the aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, and its strike group joined the Indian Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force in Malabar 2017, the largest war games held in the Indian Ocean since India and US initiated the joint exercises in 1992. Two aircraft carriers—the Nimitz and INS Vikramaditya from India—as well as the giant helicopter carrier, the JS Izumo, from Japan took part, with 16 other warships, 95 aircraft and two submarines.

While the naval exercises proceeded, the Indian and Chinese militaries were at loggerheads on a Himalayan ridge, the Doklam or Donglang Plateau, claimed by both China and Bhutan. Tensions are also mounting in the South China Sea, where China has stepped up its naval presence in response to provocative US actions.

A statement issued by the US Navy web site and the US Embassy in India on July 6, said the primary aim of Malabar 2017 was to “address the variety of shared threats to maritime security in Indo-Asia Pacific.”

Rear Admiral William D Byrne, Commander US strike Group 11, said the exercises, which focussed on submarine tracking, would “eliminate possibilities of miscalculations” and send a message to “all navies is that we are better together.”

These statements do not specify the “threats.” However, under conditions where the US and India have raised concerns over increasing Chinese naval power, mainly submarines, in the Indian Ocean, the exercises obviously aim to counter China’s alleged growing military clout in the region.

An unnamed US commander ~~told~~ ^{has} told the on July 11 the exercises would have “significant impact on the Chinese.” He added: “They [China] will know we are standing together and that is better to stand together.”

US officials pointed to broader US geo-strategic aims in the Asia-Pacific. On the US Pacific Command web site, Commander Vernan Stanfield, the Nimitz Strike Group operations officer, said: “The exercise continues to grow because we are bringing more ships and we are bringing together three countries.”

In a *Times of India* op-ed piece on July 11, the US charge d’affaires in New Delhi, Mary Key Carlson, said the US “welcomes” India’s “growing defence capabilities” and its “commitment to a common set of principles for the region, according to which sovereignty and international law are respected.”

Carlson referred to the recent meeting of Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington, which highlighted the “importance of navigation, overflight and commerce”—a clear message directed against China over the disputed South China Sea territorial claims.

The Malabar exercises are a part of India’s growing integration into the US strategic offensive against China under the Modi government. On June 26, Trump and Modi pledged to strengthen the Indo-US “global strategic partnership” when they met at the White House for the first time.

The Modi government’s support for Japan as a permanent Malabar partner two years ago was in line with Washington’s push for a trilateral anti-China alliance. It also dovetailed with the Indian elite’s desire to forge ties with Tokyo for its own geo-political interests in the Indo-Pacific region. At last week’s G20 summit in Hamburg, Modi and his Japanese

counterpart Shinzo Abe met to “strengthen” bilateral ties. Last December, India signed what was called an “historic” civilian nuclear deal with Japan during an annual bilateral summit in Tokyo.

Indian officials attempted to deny that China was the target of the naval exercises. From Eastern Naval Command, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Vice Admiral H.C.S. Bisht refused to acknowledge that the “choice of ships and the venue of the exercise had anything to do with presence of Chinese ships or Indian threat perception in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean.” Bisht claimed Malabar 2017 had no implications for India’s military standoff with China in Doklam.

Asked about the Malabar exercises, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang told a press conference on July 7 that China has “no objection to the development of normal relations and cooperation between countries.” In a thinly-veiled warning, however, he added: “We hope such relations and cooperation are not targeted at a third country and are conducive to regional peace and stability.”

Chinese officials are undoubtedly watching the Malabar exercises closely. According to a report in the *Hindu*, an article published by the online portal *Pengpai* noted that the issue of whether the war games were “targeted at Chinese submarines” has “got people really concerned.” Li Jie, a Chinese naval expert, said: “The Malabar exercise used to be a comprehensive drill that included air defence, anti-ship elements, etc. But now the subject of the drills starts to show that there is more focus on anti-submarine warfare. It shows that they have someone as the target.”

The *Hindustan Times* reported on June 5 that ahead of the Malabar exercises, China “increased” its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, including the *Haiwaingxing*, an intelligence-gathering ship. The Indian Navy also sighted more than a dozen Chinese warships, including submarines and destroyers, during the two months before the exercises, the newspaper reported, citing Indian government sources.

By holding the largest-ever war games in the Indian Ocean, with China the obvious target, India, US and Japan, have once again revealed how geo-political tensions are dangerously escalating, with potentially devastating consequences for billions of working people and oppressed masses in the region.



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