

With Malabar exercise, Quad emerging as US-led, anti-China military alliance

Shuvu Batta, Keith Jones**16 November 2020**

India, the US, and Washington's two most important Asia-Pacific allies—Japan and Australia—are to begin today the second phase of the 2020 Malabar naval exercise.

Whilst India and the Pentagon have staged a Malabar naval exercise at least once each year since 1992, the current iteration is widely recognized as having major strategic significance. This is because it marks an important step toward the crystallization of a US-led, anti-China military-security alliance, involving New Delhi and Washington's key regional treaty allies. For the past two decades, a central aim of US global strategy, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, has been to harness India—a nuclear-armed state that borders China, provides the ideal vantage point to dominate the Indian Ocean and has a growing blue-water navy—to American imperialism's strategic agenda.

The current exercise is not formally being held under the auspices of the Quad, a strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India that was revived in 2018, and that Washington has publicly said it wants to see transformed into a NATO-style alliance.

However, it is a clear signal from the four powers that they are now seeking to develop the capacity and expertise for joint military planning, action, and combat against China—that is that they are preparing for a possible third world war.

India invited Australia to join the Malabar exercise for the first time since 2007, shortly after the Quad foreign ministers met in Tokyo in early October. Japan was already made a permanent third member of the Malabar event in 2015.

Commenting on the participation of all four members of the Quad in this year's Malabar exercise, the *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the Chinese government, declared, "the Quad military alliance is officially formed."

With bipartisan support, Washington has dramatically intensified its diplomatic, economic and military-strategic pressure on China over the past two years. In July, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly repudiated Washington's five-decade-old policy of "engagement" with China and proclaimed defeating Beijing's "tyranny"—that is, regime change—to be the animating principle and central goal of America's China policy.

Under Narendra Modi's six-year-old Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) government, India has dramatically expanded bilateral, trilateral and, since 2018, quadrilateral military-strategic ties, with the US, Japan, and Australia. However, as with Washington, this has reached a qualitatively new level amid the economic crisis and surge in global geopolitical tensions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

India's capitalist ruling elite has seized on the border dispute that erupted with China in May and led to a fatal clash in June to whip up animosity against Beijing and overcome popular opposition to integrating India still more fully into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. At last month's "2+2 meeting" of Indian and US foreign and defence ministers, New Delhi signed the final of four agreements the Pentagon considers fundamental for intelligence sharing and joint operations with foreign military allies.

The Indian media is full of commentary noting the significance of the Quad mounting a joint military exercise under conditions where India and China have each arrayed more than 50,000 troops, war planes and tanks along their disputed Himalayan border. Washington, it need be noted, demonstratively intruded into the current Indo-China border dispute almost from the get-go, accusing China of "aggression" and claiming this was part of a pattern of malevolent Chinese actions, including in the South China Sea.

While proclaiming they want peace, Indian political and military leaders have insisted that the onus for defusing the border crisis lies with Beijing. Calling for vigilance, the head of India's armed forces, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat, recently warned of "border confrontations, transgressions, unprovoked tactical military actions spiralling into a larger conflict."

The second phase of the Malabar exercise will be staged in the Arabian Sea over four days, ending Nov. 20. It will be led by two aircraft carrier battle groups, the US Navy's Nimitz Carrier Strike Group and the Indian Navy's Vikramaditya Carrier Battle Group. According to an Indian Navy press release, "The two carriers, along with other ships, submarine and aircraft of the participating navies," will engage "in high intensity naval operations" including air defence and cross-deck flying operations.

The exercise's first phase was held from Nov. 3 through Nov.

6 in the Bay of Bengal—like the Arabian Sea an integral part of the Indian Ocean—off of Visakhapatnam, in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It focussed on air defence and anti-submarine exercises, as well as practicing sea replenishment and communications.

Dominance of the Indian Ocean is central to the Pentagon's strategy to strategically encircle and militarily confront China, as its sea lanes are the principal conduit for both China's exports and the oil and other resources that fuel its economy. In the event of a war or war crisis, the US and its allies intend to strangle China economically by denying it access to the Indian Ocean by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints.

Within this strategy India plays an especially important role because of its location, large military, and strategic rivalry with Beijing.

Not only does India protrude far into the northern half of the Indian Ocean, it controls the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an island chain more than 1700 kilometres (1,050 miles) from mainland India that effectively guards the eastern entrance to the Malacca Strait. An 885-kilometer (550 mile) waterway, the Malacca Strait has been dubbed “the central artery” of world commerce. The Straits carry over 80 percent of Chinese crude oil imports and 40 percent of world trade.

India is rapidly militarizing the Andamans, with plans for further “military infrastructure development.” It is currently the Indian military’s only integrated tri-service (navy, army, air force) command. Recently a US military vehicle—the anti-submarine surveillance aircraft P-8 Poseidon—visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the first time in history. The visit was made possible through the 2016 Indo-US LEMOA agreement. One of the Pentagon’s four “foundational” agreements, it allows US warplanes and warships to use Indian bases for routine resupply and vice versa.

In the 18 years since the first Malabar exercise between India and the United States, India has greatly expanded its military might, including its strategic nuclear program. Falling economically further and further behind China, and facing an increasingly large and powerful working class, the Indian bourgeoisie has more and more come to view a close partnership with US imperialism as critical to realizing its own great-power ambitions. And it views its growing military power as providing pivotal leverage with Washington. The US, for its part, is eager to provide its ally with advanced weaponry, so as to monetize their military-security partnership, but also so as to make India more and more dependent on US military supplies.

Since 1992, India has jacked up its military budget from \$8.88 billion to more than \$70 billion, making it the world’s third largest military spender. It developed its first aircraft carrier in 2013 (INS Vikramaditya), has built nearly 30 other large surface warships and a fleet of strategic and tactical submarines.

It is also seeking to establish close military ties with other

Indian Ocean states. It has launched joint surveillance drills with the island states of the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius, and Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs) with the navies of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. To entrench and expand its naval presence, India has developed support facilities in Oman, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Singapore.

Publicly the BJP government claims that India is strategically autonomous and will never become a treaty ally of the US. There are several reasons for this: first, it fears the reaction among Indian workers, who are hostile to US imperialism; second, it is wary of Beijing’s response; and finally, it wants to retain the largest possible manoeuvring room, including New Delhi’s longstanding close military-strategic partnership with Moscow.

But among Indian military-strategic analysts it is openly admitted that India has effectively been transformed into a US “frontline state against” China.

Former Indian National Security Adviser M.K Narayanan, who is among the minority who believes India has hitched itself too tightly to Washington, recently wrote in a *Hindu* op-ed: “The US makes little secret of the fact that the primary push for getting India to sign the foundational agreements was the threat posed by China, and by appending its signature India has signed on to becoming part of the wider anti-China ‘coalition of the willing.’”

Meanwhile, Shivshankar Menon, who succeeded Narayanan as India’s national security adviser under the previous Congress Party-led government, enthused at a recent seminar over the fact that India is increasingly acting in concert with Washington and doing things for US imperialism in the manner of a treaty ally. Said Menon, “Many more people would accept that idea that we would start doing things with the US, for the US, that actually US allies would do—without an alliance.” “I think,” he continued, “the actual practice of interoperability, of taking on particular roles and of fitting into a larger common strategy—I don’t see that being problematic today.”



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