

AFTER “MALABAR 2020”, WHAT? — NEXT STEPS IN CONSOLIDATING OUR MARITIME SPACE

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The 2020 edition (the 24th in the series) of the combined naval exercise MALABAR has finally been restored to its expanded format involving combat platforms and personnel drawn from the navies of all four members of the Quad. Quite apart from the renewed invitation-to and acceptance-by the Royal Australian Navy — after a gap of some thirteen years¹ — another notable feature of this year’s exercise is that it is spread over two sea-going phases, one on India’s eastern seaboard and the other on India’s western seaboard. Phase 1 had been conducted between 03 and 06 November, in and off the naval base and port-city of Visakhapatnam — headquarters of the Indian Navy’s Eastern Naval Command, while Phase 2, was conducted in the north-western Indian Ocean (the Arabian Sea).² Contrary to some typically-premature and poorly-informed media reports,³ MALABAR 2020 is not, by any stretch of imagination, a tame or watered-down version of this annual reaffirmation of the common willingness and determination of the concerned navies to continuously enhance their maritime capabilities across the entire spectrum of dissuasive actions, deterrent ones, preventive operations and punitive ones.

For Phase 1, the Indian Navy fielded the guided-missile destroyer, INS *Ranvijay*, the guided-missile frigate INS *Shivalik*, an offshore patrol vessel, INS *Sukanya*, an underway-replenishment tanker, INS *Shakti*, and, a *Sindughosh* Class (a.k.a. KILo Class) submarine, INS *Sindhuraj*. These combatants were joined by the US Navy’s Arleigh Burke Class guided-missile destroyer, USS *John S McCain*, the Royal Australian Navy’s frigate, HMAS *Ballarat*, and the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) *Takanami* Class guided-missile destroyer, JS *Onami*. Aircraft participation included state-of-the-art helicopters integral to the surface ships, as also a variety of shore-based rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft (the latter category including the Indian Navy’s

¹ The first time the RAN participated in Malabar was in 2007, along with the navies of the US, India, Japan, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

See also:

Rajesh Soami, “Indian Invitation to Australia Transforms Malabar into a Quadrilateral Naval Exercise”, 22 October 2020, NMF Website. <https://maritimeindia.org/indian-invitation-to-australia-transforms-malabar-into-a-quadrilateral-naval-exercise/>

² Indian Navy Press Release, “Malabar-20 Phase 1 : 03 To 06 November 2020”, Indian Navy Official website. <https://indiannavy.nic.in/node/27055>

³ Abhijnan Rej, “Expanded Malabar Exercise to Start on November 3”, The Diplomat, 31 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/expanded-malabar-exercise-to-start-on-november-3/>

Hawk AJTs, Dornier-228 Medium-Range Maritime-Patrol aircraft, and, P8-I long-range maritime-patrol (LRMP) aircraft capable of deep-sea ‘Area-ASW’ operations.⁴

Participating surface combatants in Phase-2 of the exercise (from the 17th to the 20th of November) include the Indian Navy’s latest indigenous guided-missile destroyers, INS *Kolkata* and INS *Chennai*, a stealth frigate — INS *Talwar*, and, an underway-replenishment tanker, INS *Deepak*, all of which are major elements of the Indian Navy’s carrier battle group (CBG) centred upon the aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya*. They were joined by surface-combatants of the US Navy’s carrier strike group (CSG) centred upon the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS *Nimitz*, and included the cruiser USS *Princeton* and the Arleigh Burke Class guided-missile destroyer, the USS *Sterett*, in addition to the HMAS *Ballarat* and the JS *Marusame*, which replaced the *Onami*. One of the Indian Navy’s latest diesel-electric submarines, the INS *Khanderi* provided for the exercise of submarine and anti-submarine operations.⁵ The air element was extremely substantive in Phase-2, with rotary and fixed-wing aircraft integral to the two aircraft carriers (a complex mix of MiG-29K and F-18 Super Hornet fighters supported by E2C Hawkeye Air Early Warning & Control [AEW&C] fixed-wing aircraft as well as Kamov-31 AEW&C helicopters plus a variety of helicopters, and supplemented by shore-based aircraft, most notably a number of P8-I LRMP aircraft of the Indian Navy and their US counterparts, the P8-A.⁶

The impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has merely meant that the physical, face-to-face planning-processes and shore-based activities that were established norms in previous editions of the exercise have had to be replaced by online-processes, and, some sea-based exchanges of personnel have had to be curtailed in this particular edition. This is what is meant when this particular edition of the series has been described as a ‘no-contact exercise’.

There has also been some commentary that the MALABAR exercise specifically targets China. The truth, of course, is that the exercise generates and promotes interoperability in all the many facets of that term. The MALABAR series of exercise promotes, for instance technical interoperability related to communications, involving management of the frequency-spectrum. By itself, the allocation of specific communication-frequencies for unplanned encounters at sea involving shipping *per se* are already covered in adequate detail by the provisions of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).⁷ However, when cryptographic systems are overlaid upon this in order to authenticate the identity of what might turn out to be a warship, specific technical as well as procedural protocols need to be practiced. The ability to do so is the commonest form of interoperability. Where military radar frequencies are involved for detection

⁴ Indian Navy official website, “Phase 2 of Exercise Malabar 2020 in Western Indian Ocean”, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/phase-2-exercise-malabar-2020-western-indian-ocean>

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

See also:

Government of India, Ministry of Defence Press Release, “Phase 2 of Exercise MALABAR 2020 in Western Indian Ocean”, PIB Delhi, 16 Nov 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1673165>

⁷ ITU Report ITU-R M.2231-1, “Use of Appendix 18 to the Radio Regulations for the Maritime Mobile Service”, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/opb/rep/R-REP-M.2231-1-2014-PDF-E.pdf

See also:

ITU Mobile-Satellite Service (MSS) Handbook, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/opb/hdb/R-HDB-41-2002-OAS-PDF-E.pdf

rather than communications, the requirement for interoperability increases. However, it should not be concluded that these are the only sorts of interoperability that the MALABAR exercises promote. Take, for instance, the need to standardise technical and tactical facets of the planning and execution of 'helicopter operations from ships other than [aircraft] carriers' (commonly abbreviated to HOSTAC⁸), across warships belonging to different navies. The implementation of these standardised technical and operational procedures is certainly not limited to combat operations alone. For instance, multinational naval operations seeking to provide Humanitarian-Assistance and Disaster-Relief (HADR), or the evacuation of casualties (CASEVAC) by a naval helicopter either from or to warships that may well belong to different navies, would most definitely require such standardisation. This is equally true of helicopter-based aerial surveys of a stricken stretch of coast, where helicopters may well require to stage through a variety of ships (of different navies) in order to enhance the range of their operations. The same is true of Search and Rescue operations. Interoperability also involves fungible processes of storage of specific items that might be needed in a civilian emergency, so that navies do not end up in situations of the "*if-I-brought-the-blankets-and-you-brought-the-blankets-then-who-brought-the-tents?*" variety! None of these interoperable skill-sets are limited to combat, and hence, it is not that MALABAR exercises seek to target any given country. The interoperable skills, processes, procedures, and technical stipulations, seamlessly lend themselves to a variety of tasks that range from benign applications to combat-related ones. In the past, since the 2004 Tsunami, there has been an increase in benign applications which is indicative of a "Greater Good" and not targeting any specific country.

And yet, it would be naive to pretend that the assertive and aggressive rise of a rampant China has no impact upon the navies of the MALABAR series, which are, as has already been stressed, also the navies of the four members of the QUAD. The ongoing MALABAR-2020 is, indeed, a mechanism for strategic signalling. It serves notice to Beijing that China's cavalier dismissal of a maritime domain that is based on internationally and consensually-derived rules, is unacceptable to the large majority of nations (barring perhaps Pakistan and North Korea). In countering China's increasingly naked display of its naval prowess, it is important to be able to signal the fact that these four navies have a *combined* military power that exceeds that of the Chinese Navy, by several orders of magnitude.

In broader terms, the 'strategic signal' that is sought be conveyed is one of Indian resolve and commitment to not just the freedom of maritime navigation and overflight but the far more fundamental 'rules-based order at sea'. One sometimes encounters questions like "What does that mean? Whose Rules? Whose order?" Over the seventy-five years that have elapsed since the end of the Second World War, a whole range of internationally and consensually generated rules, processes and procedures have been evolved that govern maritime activity, including unplanned or unexpected encounters at sea involving warships or other maritime-security vessels. For instance, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) specifies radio-

⁸ NATO Unclassified Publication MPP-02, "Helicopter Operations from Ships Other Than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC)" Edition (H) Version (1), April 2017

See also:

Time of India, "India, US to Implement HOSTAC to Strengthen Maritime Security", PTI, 27 Oct, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-us-to-implement-hostac-to-strengthen-maritime-security/articleshow/61254477.cms>

frequencies that are to be used for unplanned encounters of ships — including warships and naval auxiliaries. Likewise, the International Code of Signals (ICS), which is popularly known as ‘INTERCO’, provides for daytime flag-signals that are used internationally — once again, including by warships, while the Standard Communication Phrases (SCP) caters for linguistic- and pronunciation-variations that might inadvertently cause confusion. The 1972 Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (which are, in many countries abbreviated to ‘ROR’ [Rules of the Road], and in others are known as ‘COLREGS’ [Collision-prevention Regulations]), along with its periodic amendments, regulate how ships — yet again, including warships — are to act so as ensure navigational safety. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982, (UNCLOS) provides the broad overarch and is often referred-to as a “Constitution for the Oceans”.⁹ Where unexpected encounters specifically between warships from countries potentially inimical to each other are concerned, Appendix 4 to Annex A of the “San Remo Handbook on Rules of Engagement” published by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law, (San Remo, Italy), provides adequate guidelines in respect of *‘hostile intent’*. Taken in aggregate, these rules, regulations, conventions, and norms of behaviour cover the entire gamut of ship/vessel-based maritime intercourse and this is precisely what is meant by a ‘Rules-based Order’.

It is important to note that China has formally and publicly signed and committed itself to every one of these documents, and yet, continues to disregard them. It is true that at the present juncture, this disregard is most visible in China’s behaviour in the South China Sea, but as China’s maritime expansion continues in the South Pacific (think Vanuatu¹⁰ and Kiribati¹¹) and the Indian Ocean, we should expect further manifestations of Chinese ‘exceptionalism’,¹² which, as the Cambridge dictionary adequately explains, is *“the idea that a person, country or political system can be allowed to be different from, and perhaps better than, others”*.¹³ Some commentators express the view that the pot ought not to be calling the kettle black, in that the USA, which for years has

⁹ Tommy TB Koh, “A Constitution for the Oceans”, Remarks by President of the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, 06 and 11 December 1982, Montego Bay, Jamaica, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/koh_english.pdf

¹⁰ Jamie Smyth, Financial Times, “China Aid Wins Influence in Pacific Despite Rising Concerns”, 14 November 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/bf2cfd72-f6c1-11e9-9ef3-eca8fc8f2d65>

See also:

Melissa Clarke and Prianka Srinivasan, “Chinese Private Investment Leading Beijing’s Push into the Pacific”, ABC News, 24 October 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-24/rainbow-city-vanuatu-chinese-investment-pacific/11626020>

¹¹ Christopher Pala, “Kiribati Re-embraces China”, Asia & The Pacific Policy Society, 17 August 2020, <https://www.policyforum.net/kiribati-re-embraces-china/>

See also:

Steve Raaymakers, “China expands its island-building strategy into the Pacific”, The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 11 September 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-expands-its-island-building-strategy-into-the-pacific/>

¹² Yuan-kang Wang, “The Myth of Chinese Exceptionalism: A Historical Perspective on China’s Rise”, doi 10.1007/978-3-319-10034-0_3

See also:

Yuan-kang Wang, “The Myth of Chinese Exceptionalism” in *Steve Walt’s Blog*, Foreign Policy, 06 March 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/06/the-myth-of-chinese-exceptionalism/>

See also:

Benjamin Ho, “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China’s Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness”,

¹³ Cambridge Dictionary, “Exceptionalism”, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/exceptionalism>

espoused exceptionalism¹⁴ is now objecting to Beijing taking a leaf out of the American book. Such views, howsoever emotively appealing, are flawed in logic, for the fallacy of “*tu quoque*” (meaning “you also did it”) is a universally acknowledged one. For example, one cannot base one’s objection to having been fined for having parked one’s vehicle illegally upon the fact that some other person also parked his or her vehicle illegally but wasn’t fined!

Whether at an individual level or a national one, past behaviour is always what shapes one’s expectation of future behaviour. Given China’s pathetic past record, it is very difficult to understand the ongoing diplomatic obsession to get China to sign additional documents that promise future good behaviour (be this by way of the 1998 *Agreement on Establishing a Consultation Mechanism to Strengthen Military Maritime Safety* (MMCA), or, the April 2014 “*Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea*” (CUES), or, the November 2014 “*Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters*”, or the ASEAN-preferred “*Declaration of Conduct*” (DOC) and its evolution into a “*Code of Conduct*” (COC).

In fact, no further ‘signing’ is likely to be any more effective in regulating China’s behaviour. If China is not behaving in accordance with these consensually-derived rules and regulations — all of which, it is reiterated, China has publicly and repeatedly committed-to — an insistence upon any additional ‘signed commitment’ for a narrower, subregion-specific commitment of ‘good behaviour’ is unlikely to be more than chasing a chimaera and runs the very real risk of confusing ‘activity’ with ‘accomplishment’.

Perhaps it is time to stop flogging this dead horse. Concerted international pressure by way of deliberate and carefully-calibrated military-signalling (as is being done through MALABAR-2020), coupled with social- (rather than ‘economic’) ‘ostracization’, and, a ‘collective’ leveraging of extant legal arbitral mechanisms, are probably more likely to produce the desired behavioural change — if for no other reason than that nations, like individuals, want to be liked by their peers.

All this notwithstanding, the only comprehensive way of handling China is to ensure that we stitch our own segment of the Indo-Pacific — that is, the Indian Ocean Region — in so evidently a win-win manner that China cannot utilise any cracks or fissures through which to make its own entry. In other words, we need to concentrate our entire effort upon consolidating our regional space — not as a regional hegemon, but as the most reliable, trustworthy and magnanimous ‘partner’ of all — thereby denying China any strategic space in which to manoeuvre. This requires India to consciously abjure some of the traits that are, rightly or wrongly, associated with us — extreme condescension, derision and dismissiveness for those considered to be weaker, coupled with Mughal obsequiousness for those considered to be more

¹⁴ Katrina Lavender, “Political Theory of the USA: What is meant by ‘American Exceptionalism’ and can America maintain the idea of its own exceptionalism in the 21st century?”, https://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/Theories_of_Exceptionalism

powerful. We need to market ourselves intensively and cleverly, as the net provider of *holistic* maritime security — not military security alone. The next steps, therefore, involve regional leadership by simply ‘walking the talk’ and giving tangible, partnership-based manifestations to India’s vision of SAGAR (**S**ecurity **A**nd **G**rowth for **A**ll in the **R**egion) as an overarching foreign-policy doctrine and to the IPOI (Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative) as our principal regional policy, transcending the ‘Act East Policy’ by amalgamating a more comprehensive, Indo-Pacific outlook. If we can do this with imagination, regional sensitivity, and a genuine shift to a constructivist approach to our international relations, China will automatically be denied the strategic space in which to effect any manoeuvres of its own.

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