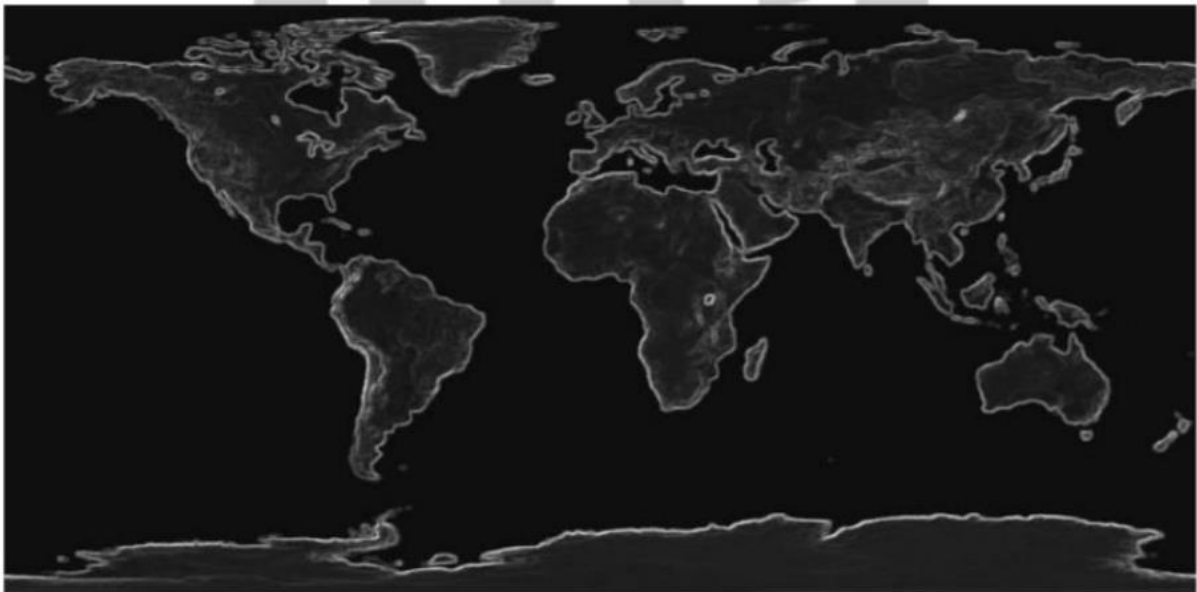


INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC NARRATIVE: THE MALABAR CONVERGENCE

Evaluating the future of Malabar Exercise through historic analysis

Veritas et Aequitas



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Introduction

The historical evolution of the Malabar exercise series could be seen, perhaps, as representing a barometer of the shifting geopolitics and the changing India's IR approach in the Indo -



Pacific region. What initially began as a tentative opening of maritime contacts between India and the US off the Malabar Coast took the form of a serious effort to shape the maritime order in the larger region and constructively turned out to be a reinforcement exercise in the context of the rising power of China. It's shifting from the Malabar Coast to the Bay of Bengal and alternating between the latter and Western Pacific region suggests a strategic convergence between India and US in the 'Indo - Pacific'; this convergence later extended to Japan, Singapore, and Australia but also, in varying degrees, to the other South China Sea littorals.

Post-Cold War, India's strategic objective has been to shape the maritime order in a manner that it can neutralise the external threats arising from the adjacent oceanic waters to its socio-economic and technological progress, as India's economy grew so did its larger maritime interests which grew beyond the proximate oceanic space. Thus, Malabar Exercises became conducive to be underpinned by naval power projection capabilities. Malabar Naval exercise became an enforcing tool for the evolution of the Indian Foreign Policy view of its neighbourhood from a territorial centric view, to a more holistic view that encompassed maritime borders and the Indian Ocean Maritime Region.

Throughout history, the maritime domain has been a crucial space in establishing new and emerging powers shaping regional dynamics and the larger security architecture. Since the late 1990s, India's attempt to strengthen its maritime status has gathered a decisive pace. The great sea power competition which started off the Malabar coast is expanding itself to new security partners and reinforcing the strategic maritime boundaries. Following a post-Cold War initiative from the US side, the Indian Navy (IN) and the US Navy (USN) instituted the annual Malabar Exercise in 1992 as a token passage exercise (PASSEX). After a brief hiatus (1998-2001) due to India's Pokhran-II nuclear tests, 'Malabar' recommenced in 2002. From 1992 to 2007, the scope of the exercises progressively increased, in terms of the participating navies, the exercise area, and the complexity of naval missions. Following the diplomatic fallout of India's nuclear tests of 1998, the frequency of the bilateral exercises dwindled, only regaining their regularity after 2004. In 2007 the bilateral accord expanded its scope to include other key Asian states like *Australia*, *Japan*, and *Singapore*. Since 2002, every year there has been a naval drill and Japan finally became a permanent participant in 2015. From carrying out

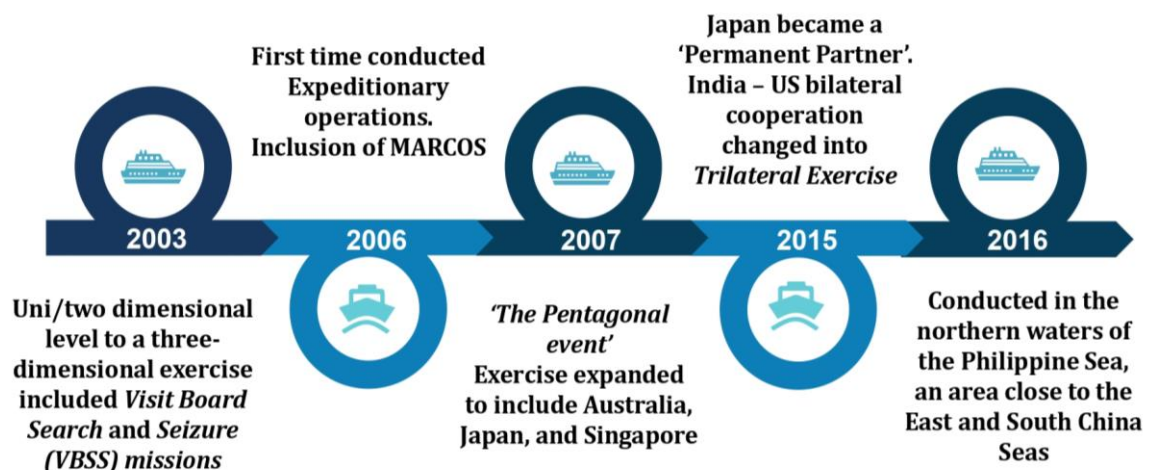


bilateral Naval Exercises, there was an aperture in conducting Trilateral Exercises i.e between India, USA, and Japan.

Navigating the Trajectory

The Malabar exercise conducted in 2003 was seminal since it not only graduated from the uni/two-dimensional level to a three-dimensional exercise (involving surface, sub-surface, and air platforms) but also included *Visit Board Search* and *Seizure (VBSS) missions* against suspect vessels. Such operations may be necessary to curb terrorist use of sea transportation, including for trafficking of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

The Malabar exercises conducted in November 2006, for the first time, included Expeditionary operations, which have immense applicability for India given its growing normative responsibility to ensure regional stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The 2006 Malabar exercises mission focused on the involvement of the US Landing Helicopter Dock (LDH) USS Boxer and the US Marines forces, operating in conjunction with Indian Army troops and Indian marine commandos (MARCOS). This was a valuable lesson for the Indian Navy to emulate the concepts of *operating expeditionary platforms* and *stand-off amphibious operations*. Three months later, the Indian Navy inducted the USS Trenton and rechristened it as INS Jalashwa.



In 2007, the trajectory witnessed a shift from the exercise as a bilateral event to a trilateral and then went on to evolve as a multilateral exercise. The Malabar exercise in April 2007 was the first exercise to have been conducted outside the Indian Ocean. Although an India-US bilateral event, it was nearly enmeshed with TRILATEX-07 involving Japan as well. The major highlights in Malabar of April 2007 were the maritime strike missions, dissimilar air-combat and 'buddy-refueling' between the Indian Air Force (IAF) Jaguars and the US F-18 Super Hornet aircraft.

Changing nature of 'Malabar' from 'Bilateral - Trilateral - Multilateral'

After the end of the Cold War, India began conducting naval exercises with all major navies, in consonance with its multi-vectored foreign policy. The Malabar exercise of 2007 - (September), *'The Pentagonal event'* was of significant importance, as the India-U.S.

cooperation was expanded to include Australia, Japan, and Singapore in multilateral official level security talks and the exercise for the first time was held in the Bay of Bengal region. On the face of it, having a five-nation naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal seemed sensible, to optimise the costs of conducting so many separate bilateral exercises with India's partners. The rationale to have Malabar at the multilateral elucidated on the imperatives of '*cost-effectiveness*' and '*resource optimisation*'. India's decision to include Australia, Japan and Singapore in 'Malabar' may have been largely driven by the commonality of operational philosophy between the navies. That year also saw the launch of the Quadrilateral Initiative involving India, the US, Japan, and Australia; following Chinese diplomatic demarches, Australia withdrew from the Quadrilateral Initiative and both Australia and Singapore withdrew from the Malabar Exercises.

Image 1 - The Malabar Exercises from 1992 - 2014 - Participants and Location



The strategically significant Joint India–US Naval exercise Malabar-2015, conducted in the Bay of Bengal, illustrated the growing multi-faceted military cooperation between India and the USA and underpinned their collective effort to define the strategic contours of the Indo-Pacific security. The exercise showcased the Indian Navy's aircraft carrier, INS Vikramaditya with its air wing, the US Navy's Nimitz-class carrier with its air wing, and Japan's helicopter carrier, the JS Izumo. The Malabar exercise was noteworthy in 2015 for the *trilateral* nature that it had acquired with the Japanese participation. This signifies a major shift in India's approach to the evolving contemporary security calculus of the Indo-Pacific region. Japan's regular participation in Malabar exercises (2007, 2009, and 2014) made this trilateral initiative an integral part of the strengthened strategic relations between India, the USA, and Japan.



Table 1 - Malabar Exercises from 1992 - 2019

<u>Year</u>	<u>Country/Participation</u>	<u>Exercise areas</u>	<u>Platforms</u>	<u>Sea days</u>
1992	India-USA	Off India's West Coast	Destroyers/ frigates	1 day
1995	India-USA	Persian Gulf	Indian warship and US SSN5 on the passage (UAE to Kuwait)	1 day
1996	India-USA	Off Kochi	7 ships (3 from each side and a US logistics ship)	2 days
2002	India-USA	Arabian Sea	2 destroyers/ frigates from each side	4 days
2003	India-USA	Off Kochi	6 ships, including US SSN & Indian diesel submarine, US P3C Orion aircraft	3 days
2004	India-USA	Off Goa	7 ships, including US SSN & Indian diesel submarine	8 days
2005	India-USA	Off Kochi	7 ships, including 2 carriers (Nimitz, Viraat), US SSN & Indian diesel submarine	8days
2006	India-USA	Off Goa	US SSN, Amphibious ships, US Marines, Indian Army Landing Forces	11 days
2007, April	India-USA	Philippine Sea	12 ships, including 3 carriers (Nimitz, Kitty Hawk, Viraat), Amphibious ships, US SS & P3C Orion aircraft	4 days
2007, September	India-USA-Japan-Australia-Singapore	Bay of Bengal	26 ships. US: 13, including 2 carriers & SSN. India: 8, including carrier. Australia: 2. Japan: 2. Singapore: 1	6 days



2008	India-USA	Arabian Sea	15 ships, including US Carrier & SSN, & Indian diesel submarine	10 days
2009	India-USA-Japan	Off Okinawa	6 ships including US SSN	6 days
2010	India-USA	Off Goa	10 ships, including US SSN & Indian diesel sub. US P3C Orion	7 days
2011	India-USA	Off Okinawa	8 ships, including US SSN	5 days
2012	India-USA	Bay of Bengal	9 ships including US Carrier Battle Group	7 days
2013	India-USA	Off Visakhapatnam	No Carriers. 4 ships, including US P3C Orion & IN TU-142 aircraft	6 days
2014	India-USA-Japan	Off Nagasaki	8 ships including US Carrier, SSN & P3C Orion. Japan's P3C Orion & US-2 aircraft	6 days
2015	India-USA-Japan	Bay of Bengal	4 Indian Navy's fleets, Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and Japan's JS Fuyuzuki	6 days
2016	India-USA-Japan	Philippine Sea	4 Indian naval fleets including INS Sahayadri and Satpura, USN 7th fleet, and Japan's JS Hyuga	4 days
b2017	India-USA-Japan	Bay of Bengal	INS Jyoti and Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft P8I, US Nimitz-class aircraft carrier and Japan's JS Sazanami & JS Izumo	8 days
2018	India-USA-Japan	Off the coast of Guam	3 surface warships from India, USS Ronald Regan, and Japan's 3 class destroyers	10 days



2019	India-USA-Japan	Off the coast of Japan	2 Indian Naval Ships, the Multipurpose Guided Missile Frigate <i>Sahyadri</i> , and ASW Corvette <i>Kiltan</i> . <i>USS McCampbell</i> and Japan's <i>JS Kaga</i> , <i>JS Samidare</i> and <i>Choukai</i>	9 days
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The above narrative amply showcases the intense naval activity in the Indo-Pacific region and at least four trends merit attention to understand India's evolving foreign policy approach in the Indo-Pacific. **First**, India is encouraging other states and their navies to conduct multilateral naval exercises which suggest that coalitions are being formed to target a common or multiple challengers. According to US Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper, "bilateral relationships are good, but multilateral cooperation is better" and the US is encouraging Indo-Pacific countries to "expand their intra-regional security relationships and networks of like-minded partners."

Second, the geography of these exercises is shifting from the usual comfort zones (home waters) to seas close to hotspots. **Third**, the participating ships in these exercises have been high-end combatants including nuclear aircraft carriers, nuclear and conventional submarines and missile fitted destroyers and frigates for power projection. **Fourth**, the stated purpose and aim of Malabar exercises is much different from what it used to be a few years ago when the navies proudly stated that they were cooperating to respond to asymmetric threats and challenges such as piracy, terrorism, drug running, and gun smuggling. Today, the conversation around Malabar has gone from it being a key part of the U.S.-India naval drill to a broader platform for regional collaboration and defense cooperation in Indo-Pacific. Drawing the analogy from the Cobra Gold exercises – which began as a U.S.-Thailand engagement but is now Asia's largest multinational drill – Malabar has begun to forge and empower multilateralism to include other regional partners of the Indo-Pacific.

US-India-Japan Relations: Indo - Pacific Narrative

While it is clear that India, Japan, and the US are testing the waters and looking to forge a closer maritime partnership, they have also been averse to taking on China head-on. This is reflected in the exclusion of Australia from the Malabar exercises, despite its stated position to join. At the same time, these three countries have reasons to be worried about China's growing power projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean region. The scant respect Beijing has paid to international rules of conduct in its dealings with countries like the Philippines have also prompted other countries in the Indo-Pacific to reassess their capabilities vis-à-vis China.

The Malabar exercises continue to rise in terms of its importance in the near future. These exercises allowed the three nations the opportunity to test the collaboration between their personnel and the interoperability of their military platforms. Japanese PM Shinzo Abe way back in August 2007 (during his earlier term in office) in his landmark [speech before the Indian Parliament titled "Confluence of the Two Seas" had been very prescient in noting that "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity."](#) His words are now ringing true on the high seas of the Indo-Pacific region.

Image 2 - U.S Nimitz Carrier Strike Group Arrives in India for Malabar 2017



Source: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-naval-update-map-july-13-2017>

US interest was clearly to ensure ‘interoperability’ of the three navies through the joint exercise and it received a constructive response from the two other participating navies of the region. The normalisation of Self Defence Forces of Japan enabled Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force to conduct military operations abroad. Japan’s main concern, as pointed out earlier, has been the rising assertive military presence of China in the South China Sea and was thus willing to strengthen its security relations with India. The Indian Navy also respected the trust with its strategic partners by introducing its ace pack INS Sindhudhwaj the Russian-designed Sindhughosh (Kilo) class submarine, known for its stealthily monitoring of the warships traversing the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Till now, the Indian Navy had flatly refused to give foreign forces access to train against the ‘Kilo’ class to potentially detect and record the elusive sound profile of the submarine. The data generated are so precious that it is considered a ‘gold-mine’ for the naval intelligence fraternity. Thus, the introduction of its ace machine into the exercise signified the enormous trust developed between the navies of India, the USA, and Japan.

Bolstering security and interoperability

For dealing with such a complex situation in its neighbourhood and to maintain credible consistent influence in the IOR, India is creating partnerships to plug these critical gaps. The neighbourhood policy is well enshrined in the territorial space but with aggrandizing the strategic reach of Malabar exercises, India is upsurging a *new international relations approach* in the Indo - Pacific vis-a-vis the **Maritime Neighbourhood Policy**. In doing so, military exercises and mature interoperability will hold the key in establishing military-to-military linkages amongst the strong militaries of the region which have a global reach. It can also be leveraged for joint surveillance by sharing information as also for strengthening cooperation in the field of logistics to achieve more comprehensive goals. Thus, the Malabar exercise can be seen as a routine professional interaction amongst navies of India, the USA, and Japan that will strengthen mutual trust and confidence by sharing operational capabilities together. These exercises will not only enhance the interoperability but will *provide exposure* to Indian planners about the methodologies and doctrines framed and executed by the prominent navies like the USA and Japan.



On a larger scale, it is also a reflection of the intertwining of strategic interests combined inevitably navigated by the political leadership signaling a clear message widely visible and easy to read. In the evolving strategic environment of the newly formed strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific, the maritime domain has become the linchpin in the broader scale of engagement of these prominent players of Indo-Pacific that defines their collective strategic interests. **MALABAR** holds a great significance not just as a routine joint naval activity but defines the proactive approach of India in the vital oceanic region of the world and its evolving IR approach towards its maritime neighbourhood.

Australia's belated overture towards MALABAR

The June 4, 2020, virtual summit between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Scott Morrison. Australian High Commissioner to India Barry O'Farrell ignited hopes of an expanded Malabar. India seeks to increase cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain and in the light of increased defence cooperation with Australia, Malabar 2020 witnessed the participation of the Australian Navy in the planned 'non – contact sea' form. The Malabar Exercise, 2020 was conducted in two phases.

Phase I

- The first phase of the three-day quadrilateral naval exercise Malabar took place from November 3 to November 6. India, the United States, Japan, and Australia conducted the exercise in the Bay of Bengal. The exercise demonstrated the high-levels of synergy and coordination between the navies of these four countries.
- The first phase witnessed complex and advanced naval exercises comprising a surface, anti-submarine, and anti-air warfare operations. Cross-deck flying and weapon firing operations are also a part of this quadrilateral exercise, they added.
- As reported by the Indian Navy, the first phase envisaged the participation of Indian Navy units with USN Ship USS John S McCain (a guided-missile destroyer), RAN Ship HMAS Ballarat (long-range frigate) with integral MH-60 helicopter, and JMSDF Ship JS Onami (destroyer) with an integral SH-60 helicopter.



Source: PTI



Phase 2

- The second phase of the multilateral naval Exercise Malabar 2020 was conducted in the Northern Arabian Sea. The phase involved coordinated operations of increasing complexity between the navies of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.
- The major highlight of the four-day second-phase exercise was the participation of the Indian Navy's Vikramaditya carrier battle group and the Nimitz strike group of the US Navy (the world's largest ship)
- Also, advanced surface and anti-submarine warfare exercises, seamanship evolutions, and weapon firings were undertaken to further enhance interoperability and synergy between the four friendly navies.



Source: Indian Navy

Today, the conversation around Malabar has gone from it being a key part of U.S.-India engagement to a broader platform for Indo-Pacific defense cooperation. Foreign Minister Payne said that the Malabar exercise also "showcases the deep trust between four major Indo-Pacific democracies and their shared will to work together on common security interests" Australia's return to the Malabar naval exercises strengthens not only the maritime perspectives shared by India and Australia but also their cooperative vision in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which further develops the strategic context for more serious maritime cooperation.

"High-end military exercises like MALABAR are key to enhancing Australia's maritime capabilities, building interoperability with our close partners, and demonstrating our collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific,"

- Linda Reynolds CSC, Minister of Defence, Government of Australia

The growing instability in the international order 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 the potential that lies ahead with the inclusion of Australia in Malabar and an enhanced commitment to this alignment of democracies. This Maritime alliance would increasingly be able to prove itself beyond being



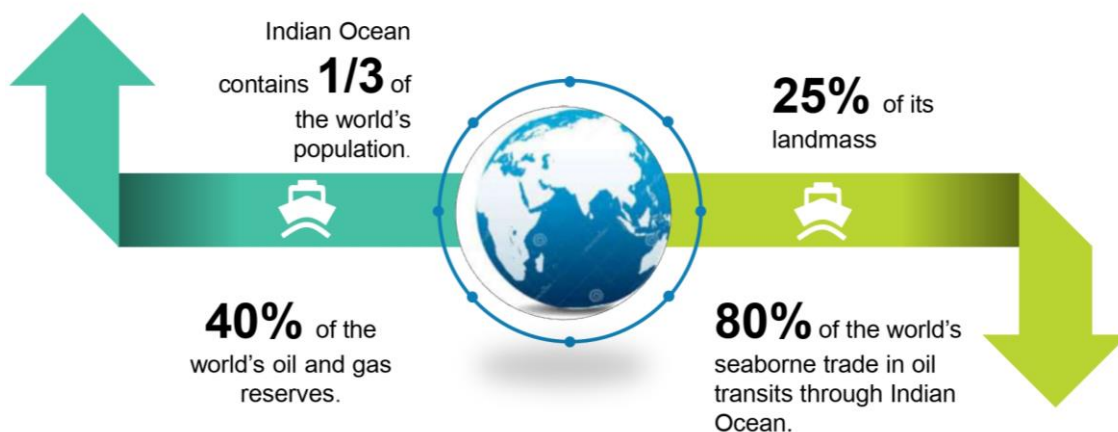
merely a “foam in the Ocean, destined to dissipate soon.” In the longer term, with the permanent participation of Australia, in the quadrilateral framework, Malabar could eventually be viewed as a growing strategic convergence and deeper defense cooperation are realized. Malabar naval exercise, seen as a prelude to future military cooperation among the member nations of the Quad or Quadrilateral Coalition.

Much like the path taken by the Cobra Gold exercises – which began as a U.S.-Thailand engagement but is now Asia’s largest multinational drill – Malabar has begun to envisage multilateralism to include other American partners in the region. At the broadest level, the multilateralization of the exercise has been read as part of a growing convergence between the United States, India, and other actors like Japan and Australia which are each strengthening their security presence in the Indo - Pacific. China’s assertive actions in the East and the South China Sea have played a catalyzing role in this convergence, which has manifested itself in growing trilateral and even quadrilateral cooperation.

Conclusion: Significance of the Malabar Exercise

Naval cooperation between India, the US, and Japan epitomised the strong and resilient relationship between the three democracies. The Malabar series of exercises, initiated in 1992 between the Indian and US Navies, have steadily grown in scope, complexity, and participation into a multifaceted exercise with the participation of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF). The exercise has been a demonstration of the joint commitment of all three nations to address common maritime challenges across the spectrum of operations and will go a long way in enhancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, for the benefit of the global maritime community.

Indian Ocean Importance



Malabar exercise denotes the growing level of interoperability between the navies of the US, India, and Japan. With China’s growing military strength and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean, the Malabar exercise has assumed greater importance. The Malabar exercise enhances India’s credibility in the maritime domain and prioritises collective effort to secure the first of the three global commons (oceans, space, and cyberspace). As the convergence of Malabar expands, the growing number of participants will make other traditional challenges



with such exercises as coordination even more complex. But the very fact that the conversation around Malabar has shifted from a bilateral one in the 1990s to a multilateral one today is testament to its potential as a key platform for engagement in the Indo-Pacific. That itself is a significant achievement for its twenty years of existence that is worth acknowledging.

Envoi: The Way Forward

In the analysis, India's evolving strategic perspective in Indo - Pacific outlines and signifies two major maritime security objectives - India being '*Preferred Security Partner*' in IOR and promoting *Collective Maritime Competence*. Consequently, we have seen India assume a larger role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region. While showing its readiness to respect its commitment towards secure oceans, India has provided full cooperation to the maritime security domain. These include efforts at *building capacity*, *improving interoperability*, and *exchanging information* with several security partners, like the USA, Japan, and Australia.

A 'Quad Plus' proposition compliments India's 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific construct. India's Indo-Pacific vision has been poised between the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific outlook that the US and its allies would like to promote and India's 'inclusive' notion of not being confined to particular maritime boundaries. More profoundly, the endorsement of a 'Quad Plus' process indicates India's growing embrace of an American worldview that aims to defend and strengthen a liberal international order while focusing on building an Indo-Pacific narrative that has been threatened by the rise of a 'revisionist' China.

The conversation around Malabar has shifted from a bilateral one in the 1990s to a multilateral one today is a testament to its potential as a key platform for engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Based on the platform provided by the Malabar exercises, India can seizing this opportunity to take the lead in forming an overarching security alliance with the US, Japan, and Australia and establishing a perceptible participation of extra - regional powers like *France* and *Germany* in the forthcoming Malabar exercises, thereby demonstrating a cooperative approach, greater coherence and a shared resolve to address maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific.

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