

# ISAS Brief

No. 499 – 10 July 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## The 2017 Malabar Exercises – Testing Waters

*The 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Malabar exercises are taking place in the Bay of Bengal from 7 to 17 July 2017 amidst tensions along the disputed China-India-Bhutan land border in the Himalayas, and in the context of the growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean in the past few months. The major highlights of the exercise are the emphasis on submarine hunting and the debut participation of India's INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier and Japan's Izumo-class helicopter carrier. As with the past editions, the Malabar exercises this year provide an opportunity for India to deepen ties and enhance its operational compatibility with those of the other maritime powers, the United States and Japan. However, this year's Malabar exercises are of particular significance, especially with regard to China.*

Benjamin Chin<sup>1</sup>

### History of the Malabar

The year marks the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Malabar naval exercise that started in 1992 as a bilateral platform to enhance interoperability and deepen ties between the United States (US) and Indian navies.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, India invited the Australian, Japanese and Singapore navies to participate in the Malabar exercise, much to the chagrin of China which lodged formal protests with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mr Benjamin Chin is a Research Intern at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at E0002853@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Singh, Rahul. "India, US, Japan to begin Malabar drills: All you need to about the naval exercise in Indian Ocean." *Hindustan Times*, 7 July 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/>.

American, Australian, Indian and Japanese governments.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, the Malabar exercise was upgraded to include Japan as a permanent member of what is now a trilateral platform, drawing swift criticism from China. In the lead-up to the 2017 Malabar exercise, India rejected Australia's request to rejoin the quadrilateral exercise – an invitation the Australians turned down in 2007.<sup>4</sup> The reason for India's refusal to include Australia in the Malabar exercise is debatable. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as a move to avoid escalating diplomatic tensions with China.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it could also be seen as New Delhi's lack of confidence in Canberra's commitment to a quadrilateral drill, given its past withdrawal and its growing economic ties with Beijing.<sup>6</sup>

## **2017 Malabar Flotilla and Chinese Naval Presence**

This year's Malabar exercise involves around 20 warships from India, Japan and the US.<sup>7</sup> Each participant brings a major naval asset, such as the INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier, the Izumo-class helicopter carrier and the USS Nimitz-class nuclear super-carrier. Of notable mention are the debut appearances of the Vikramaditya and the Izumo in the Malabar exercise. While the 2017 Malabar exercise is not the first time that India and Japan have fielded aircraft- or helicopter-carriers, the Vikramaditya is India's first modern indigenous aircraft carrier, while the Izumo is capable of fielding short take-off and landing (STOL) and vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft such as the F-35.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ali, Mahmud. "New 'strategic partnership' against China." *BBC News*, 3 September 2007. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6968412.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6968412.stm).

<sup>4</sup> Greene, Andrew. "India to block Australia from naval exercise amid concerns it could inflame diplomatic tensions with China." *ABC News*, 21 April 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-21/india-tipped-to-block-australia-from-naval-exercise-china/8459896>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany. "It's Not China, It's You, India Seems to Tell Spurned Aussies." *Foreign Policy*. 5 June 2017. Accessed 8 July 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/05/its-not-china-its-you-india-seems-to-tell-spurned-aussies-malabar-australia-navy/>.

<sup>7</sup> Peri, Dinakar. "Malabar war games to begin from July 10." *The Hindu*, 5 July 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike the earlier *Hyūga*-class helicopter destroyer which participated in the 2016 Malabar exercise, the Izumo-class requires significantly less modifications for the deployment of VTOL and STOL aircrafts such as the F-35. For more information about the technical capabilities of the Izumo-class, see: Gamble, Matthew. "Japan's Izumo-class Helicopter Destroyer: An Aircraft Carrier in Disguise?" Center for International Maritime Security. 7 April 2016. Accessed 8 July 2017. <http://cimsec.org/japans-izumo-class-helicopter-destroyer-aircraft-carrier-disguise/24130>.

The participation of three aircraft/helicopter carriers is a reminder to Beijing that the US, India and Japan are maritime powers with maritime interests, mainly in the freedom of navigation, that have to be taken into consideration. Additionally, both the Indian and US' navies will field the P8 Poseidon aircraft in the upcoming exercise. The P8 Poseidon, an aircraft that specialises in anti-submarine warfare and maritime surveillance, has participated in previous editions of the Malabar exercises. It must be noted that, while anti-submarine warfare exercises have been a regular theme in previous editions of the Malabar exercises, this year's emphasis on submarine-hunting seems to convey a 'joint statement' by the three parties, each of whom has had tensions with China in different maritime theatres in the past year alone. For India, in particular, there has been a gradual build-up and sophistication of Chinese submarine deployments over the past few years. Indeed, as recently as April 2017, the Indian Navy sighted the presence of a Chinese Yuan-class submarine along with oceanic survey and military intelligence-gathering vessels in the Indian Ocean.<sup>9</sup> These oceanographic vessels provide critical oceanic data to the People's Liberation Army Navy to step up the intensity and complexity of future submarine deployments.<sup>10</sup>

## **Chinese Reactions (To Watch)**

While the Chinese media sources have, so far, been relatively quiet about the Malabar exercises, official Chinese statements towards other Indian maritime deployments signal Beijing's increasing discomfort over New Delhi's attempt to engage extra-regional powers. A day into SIMBEX-17, a bilateral naval exercise between Singapore and India in the sensitive South China Sea area, China warned both countries to "not hurt the interests of other countries or have a negative impact on regional peace and stability".<sup>11</sup> China's statement could be interpreted in the context of its growing concerns over the role of extra-regional maritime powers in regions it considers to be a vital sea line of communication. It is, therefore, no surprise that China acknowledged India's rebuff of Australia requests to participate in the 2017

---

<sup>9</sup> Sen, Sudhi Ranjan. "China Deploys Submarine in the Indian Ocean- India Likely to Respond." *India Today*, 4 July 2017. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/china-submarine-in-indian-ocean-region-india-china-standoff/1/993606.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Information Department. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 19." News release, 19 May 2017. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/).

Malabar exercises.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in response to media queries about this year's Malabar exercise, the Chinese spokesperson expressed "hope (that) such relations and cooperation are not targeted at a third party".<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, Sino-American relations have been rocky under US President Donald Trump's administration. Trump's approval of the second freedom-of-navigation-operations in the South China Sea in less than two months and the recent approval of US\$1.4 billion (about S\$1.9 billion) arms sale to Taiwan come across as a deliberate attempt to contain China to the first island chain. The first island chain refers to the Chinese geostrategic construct of a "maritime defence perimeter" encompassing Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines, and is deemed critical for the protection of coastal cities and sea lines of communication.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the year 2017 also marks the first time Japan has sent its largest warship, in a show of force, to the South China Sea, a move interpreted by Beijing as an attempt by Tokyo to interfere in the South China Sea disputes between China and the Southeast Asia claimants.

## Conclusion

The fact that the Malabar exercise is taking place amidst these developments and when China has challenging relationships with each of the individual participants, makes the exercise an important barometer for all. For the Indians, the response by the Chinese will, in some ways, help New Delhi better calibrate its foreign policy towards Beijing. For the US, the successful conclusion of the Malabar exercise and the statement(s) released by its officials will allow India to better determine the US' commitment to the Indian Ocean Region and perhaps the US plans for the Asia region as a whole. For the Japanese, it will be a test of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's determination to project Japan as a serious maritime power in Asia. Finally, for the Chinese, the content of the exercise and the official statements by the individual participants

---

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Information Department. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on 31 May 2017." News Release, 31 May 2017. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/).

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Information Department. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on 7 July 2017." News Release, 7 July 2017. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/).

<sup>14</sup> Oshihara, Toshi. "Chinas Vision of Its Seascape: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower." *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012): 293-314. doi:10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01349.x.

should allow Beijing to gain some insights into the capabilities and concerns of its maritime rivals.

. . . . .