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Malabar 2021 and Beyond: India's Naval Pushback Against China

Maritime diplomacy is the key to India's more muscular China strategy.

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

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The U.S. flag waves in the wind off of USS O'Kane (DDG 77), as the Indian flag is flown off of INS Shivalik (F47) at U.S. Naval Base Guam on Aug. 21, ahead of the joint naval Malabar 2021 exercise.

Credit: [U.S. Navy/Valerie Maigue](#)

Even though India's ongoing border conflict with China is land-based, the competition between Asia's two incompatible giants is playing out with increasing intensity in the oceans. Sino-Indian rivalry has multiple turfs and terrains, but it is the maritime jostling that is the most consequential, not only for the balance of power in Asia but for the entire world.

Maritime competition between China and India has shades of inevitability and destiny because of the fundamentally unique nature of the high seas, which make up two-thirds of the planet's oceans and are not part of the territorial waters of any single state. Unlike on land, where nation-states have carved up every little inch of space as sovereign territory and forcibly redrawing borders is taboo, the high seas are neutral and their command and control depend on the assertion and deployment of naval might. For any aspiring power to climb up the ladder,

its main opportunity to expand lies in the high seas rather than on land-based conquest of territory that belongs to or is claimed by another state.

The relative openness of the high seas means that any power or coalition of powers can congregate there and try to psych out or drive away opponents through a show of force. China, which has made rapid strides in naval power projection in the past two decades, understands that its path to sustained great power status lies in dominating the vast maritime spaces of the Indian and Pacific oceans. Beijing's [“two ocean strategy”](#) calls for “redistributing the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region in its favor by expanding its naval operations from the South China Sea and Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean.” That runs headlong into [India's goal](#) of sustaining and stretching its preeminence in the Indian Ocean and maintaining sea control over “a defined sea area, for a defined period of time, for one's own purposes, and at the same time deny[ing] its use to the adversary.” The naked ambitions of the two countries to be preeminent in roughly the same waters are a recipe for sustained antagonism.

Another reason why the maritime tussle between China and India is unavoidable is due to the latter's de facto alliance system in the Indo-Pacific via the “Quad” group of nations – Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – all of whom perceive Chinese naval expansion and a possible Sino-centric world order with alarm. Unlike on the land border at the Line of Actual Control, where Indian public opinion and foreign policy sensitivities about sovereignty do not allow a boots-on-the-ground presence by foreign armies of partner nations alongside the Indian Army, the high seas are seen as

legitimate areas for the Indian Navy to be interoperable and integrated with navies of foreign partners to roll back the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

The force multiplier effects of strategic partnerships to check China can manifest unhindered in the maritime domain, notwithstanding [occasional concerns](#) raised by some observers in India that “an excessive U.S. military presence in the eastern Indian Ocean Region (IOR) could needlessly provoke China” or “result in the shrinking of Indian influence.” Ever since the armies of China and India clashed in June 2020 on land in the Himalayan heights of the Galwan Valley, a realization has dawned in New Delhi that an era of strategic ambiguity and hedging cooperation with competition toward Beijing has come to an end. With the Chinese dragon baring its teeth and seeking to impose its will on its militarily and economically weaker southern neighbor, the Indian elephant has had to step up its deterrence game or risk being bullied and trampled. Inching closer to the United States and dropping hesitations about ceding ground to foreign navies in the IOR are all the outcomes of obtrusive Chinese actions.

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It is not a coincidence that, after the Galwan clash, India shifted gears with a renewed sense of purpose by devoting additional military assets to the maritime sphere and deepening robust relationships with strategic partners to meet the Chinese challenge – not just in the Indian Ocean but further away in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific. The 25th edition of the Malabar joint military exercises among navies of the Quad off the U.S. territory

of Guam from August 26 to 29, was one manifestation of the intensifying Indian agenda of halting China in the Indo-Pacific and placing counterbalancing limits on Chinese expansionism.

The 2021 Malabar exercises were qualitatively and quantitatively many notches superior to when they began in 1992 as a bilateral affair between India and the U.S. during the early post-Cold War rapprochement period between two hitherto [“estranged democracies.”](#) The credit for the upgrade goes to the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which overcame [past hesitations about angering China](#) and expanded Malabar into a quadrilateral format by making Japan a permanent participant in 2015 and inviting Australia on board in 2020. Paralleling the revival in 2017 of the Quad as a diplomatic forum, the four member countries, which share serious security concerns about Chinese behavior, have also regularized the military dimension of interoperability and preparedness for naval combat through Malabar.

[According to the Indian Navy](#), the Malabar war games of 2021 involved “high-tempo exercises conducted between Destroyers, Frigates, Corvettes, Submarines, Helicopters, and Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft of the participating navies.” On the menu was finessing “complex surface, sub-surface, and air operations including Live Weapon Firing Drills, Anti-Surface, Anti-Air and Anti-Submarine Warfare Drills, Joint Manoeuvres and Tactical exercises.” Such joint maneuvers involving the combined might of one great power – the United States – and three middle powers – Australia, India, and Japan – unambiguously convey a warning to China that there will be formidable

barriers to the PLAN's push to break free of all limits and pursue regional maritime aggrandizement against smaller littoral countries.

New Delhi's [stated motto of the Malabar exercises](#), whose locales alternate yearly between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, is to “enhance synergy and coordination between the Indian Navy and friendly countries, based on common maritime interests and commitment towards freedom of navigation at sea.” Such language leaves little doubt that the intent is to remind Beijing that it cannot take supremacy over the entire South China Sea for granted or convert the Indian Ocean into a Chinese lake through [relentless PLAN deployments and forays](#) west of the Malacca Strait.

In fact, the naval assets India sent to be part of the Malabar games this year are part of a task force dispatched on a two-month assignment across the South China Sea, which [has been described as](#) “India’s most visible ‘show of flag’ naval presence east of the Malacca Strait.” If China is penetrating the Indian Ocean with frigates and submarines, India is signaling it can do a tit-for-tat in China’s maritime backyard, not singly but in concert with the Quad and other partners.

On most [parameters of naval power](#) such as the number of submarines, destroyers, frigates, naval aviation, and aircraft carriers, China holds an upper hand over India. Hence, it is a rational strategy for India to make up for this asymmetry via a multilayered response that includes bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral maritime diplomacy, wherein assets of partner nations are pooled to blunt China’s edge and exploit China’s vulnerabilities vis-à-vis control

over the sea lanes of communication (SLOC). India's Chief of Defense Staff, Gen. Bipin Rawat, has [called the PLAN](#) “the largest expanding navy in the world” and said that India is willing to upgrade military interoperability with “anybody who is willing to come to this region with the common cause, which is FONOPS (freedom of navigation operations).”

Apart from Malabar, which [Beijing has criticized](#) as a manifestation of “India’s calculation to gang up against China,” New Delhi is also pursuing a flurry of other innovative naval permutations and operations as part of a stepped up strategy of deterrence against Chinese expansionism.

In April 2021, India and its Quad partners teamed with France in a five-nation La Perouse naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal. Rattled by the prospect of losing control over its far-flung oceanic territories in Asia to the fast-approaching Chinese juggernaut, Paris has engaged in defense diplomacy with New Delhi and Canberra, in particular, with a clear cut [“Indo-Pacific outlook.”](#) In June 2021, the Indian Navy joined a trilateral naval exercise of France, Italy, and Spain in the Gulf of Aden [with the aim of](#) upholding “shared values as partner navies in ensuring freedom of seas and commitment to an open, inclusive and a rules-based international order.”

The announcement of a formal [France-Australia-India trilateral format](#), with defense cooperation on the cards, is a promising trend that overlaps with the Quad but also makes the “Quad plus” a practical reality. Canberra also [wants New Delhi to join](#) its biennial Talisman Sabre naval exercises, which would bring together more non-Quad members like Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, and the United

Kingdom to demonstrate naval cooperation in the maritime spaces coveted by China.

Given the vulnerability of Southeast Asian countries to Chinese economic and military coercion, they have been [reluctant to formally enter the Quad](#) or associate with its combined navies. As a workaround, India has approached its eastern neighbors to explore novel forms of naval cooperation. India has launched trilateral naval games called SITMEX with Singapore and Thailand since 2019, wherein all three navies have carried out drills in the Andaman Sea, which abuts the Malacca Straits. The Indian Navy is also enhancing bilateral exercises with Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines – all of whom are struggling to ward off China’s relentless aggression over maritime territorial disputes. Discussions are also underway for an [Australia-India-Indonesia](#) trilateral formation to flex muscle in the Indo-Pacific.

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The fact that the Modi government has shed past inhibitions and taken co-ownership of the Indo-Pacific – a concept that Beijing [angrily derides](#) as an American plot to divide Asians and stoke “geopolitical competition and alliance confrontation” – shows how far India has come as a result of the ferocious Chinese assertiveness against it. By ramping up maritime diplomacy and building [what has been termed](#) as a “multi-tier cooperation and coordination mechanism to advance security as well as counter threats” in the Indo-Pacific, India is demonstrating that it can neutralize Chinese pressure on land at the LAC and apply countervailing pressure in the high seas.

The [old notion](#) that India “might be tempted to escalate from the land dimension, where it may suffer reverses, to the maritime dimension, where it enjoys substantial advantages, and employ those advantages to restrict China’s vital Indian Ocean trade” is germane and still relevant today. When the LAC crisis was at its peak in the summer of 2020, the Indian Navy undertook an [“aggressive posture”](#) to shoo away three PLAN warships off the coast of Djibouti and three other Chinese warships were pushed back through the Malacca Straits to their home bases. Indian Navy commandos were also [pressed in to operate in the Pangong Tso lake](#) at the LAC as part of a tri-services mobilization by the Modi government against Chinese incursions.

Of course, given the frontal challenge the PLA posed on land by advancing beyond the LAC, India’s maritime riposte was not its primary response to the border dispute in the Himalayas. Among the non-maritime measures India took to push China back were man-to-man “mirror deployments” of the Indian Army to match the tens of thousands of PLA soldiers at the LAC; counteroffensive Indian special forces thrusts into what China claims to be its side of the LAC; replenishing spare parts for legacy weaponry with urgent purchases from India’s old supplier Russia; beefing up air power options through quick acquisitions of fighter jets, helicopters, and reconnaissance drones from France, the United States, and Israel that were deployed close to the friction points at the LAC; and also a series of economic restrictions on Chinese investments, technology, and exports to India.

The Modi government’s “security first” approach [made it amply clear](#) to the hegemony-

seeking President Xi Jinping that “I can’t have friction, coercion, intimidation and bloodshed on the border and then say let’s have a good relationship in other domains.” While India has not yet managed to reverse the Chinese incursions at all the friction points of the LAC, its pushback has not been meek, partial, or unidimensional.

Especially in the maritime domain, India is sending out a distinct message of “game on” and is revealing a proactive willingness to compete through a web of dense partnerships with like-minded navies. In the long run, how well India wards off China in the oceans will be a key determinant of how successful New Delhi is in defending its land borders. Look no further than the Indo-Pacific for a live illustration of the interrelation of land, sea, and air dimensions in military strategy and national security.

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