

TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY, QUAD NEEDS MILITARY HEFT, NOT DESULTORY NAVAL EXERCISES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

It was the year 1964 — July, to be precise — when the annual commonwealth naval exercise was scheduled to be held in the Bay of Bengal, between the Nicobar Islands and the entrance to the straits of Malacca. The British still had a commander-in-chief, Far East Fleet, stationed in Singapore at the giant Sembawang Naval Base in the Johore Straits. The Royal Navy's Far East Fleet contributed one aircraft carrier to the exercise, along with one cruiser, three destroyers, three frigates, two submarines and two oil replenishment tankers. The Indian Navy, which had only one fleet in those days, contributed one aircraft carrier, one cruiser, two destroyers and four frigates, all of whom sailed out from Bombay (as it was, then) to join up with the Royal Naval ships, off Nancowry, in the Nicobar Islands. From Canada came three modern frigates, with the Australians contributing one destroyer and one frigate. Pakistan sent two destroyers, and the New Zealanders, one frigate. In all, 28 ships gathered for the JET (Joint Exercise off Trincomalee) series, as they were then called, as the Malabar series are now called for the Quad exercises. The operational planning was massive in the days of no internet, cellphones and printers. There were also four Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) of the Australian Navy, operating from Butterworth in Malaysia.

The exercise was held for pretty much the same geo-political reasons as they are today, apart from the obvious naval benefits. The bogeyman was not China, but the USSR, although no one mentioned it aloud. But objectives like those discussed today, such as freedom of the seas, safety of shipping lanes, a rule-bound order etc were freely bandied about. The scope of the exercises was massively spectacular. It included two weeks or 10 working days of an operational work-up, in small groups including a submarine, ending with a five-day tactical exercise, with the whole fleet divided into a red (enemy) force and a blue force. On completion of the exercise, the whole fleet entered Singapore ceremonially, for a full debrief and social gatherings hosted, in turn, by each nation. The Pakistan navy served liquor in those days.

Things have clearly changed a lot. There is an incipient and obvious threat and no one has any hesitation in pointing at China. The Far East Fleet is gone, Britain having evacuated from East of Suez in 1965, but the Americans are here, and safety of shipping lanes and an expansionist Beijing are not mythical anymore. However, in November, the Quad actually converged to continue the Malabar series, with a total of just eight ships. The Chinese foreign office spokesman had earlier dismissed the Quad as so much "foam" on the sea. Are they right or are they being overconfident? If the idea is to form a grouping of democratic nations in the Indian Ocean, and use naval power to convey a message to Beijing, what message would a grouping of eight ships convey to a nation thinking in terms of five aircraft carriers? Surely, this is more like a feather duster shown to Xi Jinping. His naval chief would have advised him that it was frivolous. But, more importantly, who is responsible in Delhi for being so ungenerous with the Indian Navy? Was it timidity or diplomatic reticence to leave the glass half full? Are our four nations incapable of mustering 30 ships?

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Anyway, this opportunity has been lost and let us look to the future. If there is reticence to a bigger seasonal naval presence, an answer has to be found. But first, there is no substitute for naval power to ensure oceanic stability, but one alternative lies in the area of Maritime Domain

Awareness (MDA). Perhaps, some thought may already have been given to MDA in the twin agreement to BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), and that is the Maritime Information Sharing Technical Agreement (MISTA) signed between India and the US. There is little information available in the public domain about MISTA. But what it should cover is an omnibus agreement for Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) operating and information sharing for the entire Indo-Pacific. This is easier said than done because the Pacific has a high density of MPA assets, while they are sparse in the Indian Ocean, particularly the western Indian Ocean. The Australians can, of course, cover the Malacca Straits, but for the west Indian Ocean, the US will probably have to base a squadron of P-8 aircraft at Masirah or Diego Garcia. How will this shake the Chinese Navy? Today, the primary weapon system of most warships is the surface-to-surface missile, with ranges of up to 200 km. The ships' sensor range is only up to 100 km, and accurate target information has to be supplied beyond 100 km by aircraft or helicopters in what is called Over the Horizon Targeting (OTHT). A ship with OTHT will definitely sink a ship without it.

With the Indo-Pacific fully covered by the MPAs of the Quad, a PLAN ship in the Indian Ocean is in imminent danger of being sunk at will. A public announcement of a division of the Indo-Pacific into areas of responsibility for MDA, between members of the Quad will send an unmistakable signal to Beijing of the constant danger to Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean, should hostilities arise. With a desultory Quad naval exercise, once a year of a few ships, Beijing will only be amused that a "threat" exists to its ambition to become a global power.

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This article first appeared in the print edition on November 28, 2020 under the title 'Adrift in the Indian Ocean'. The writer is a former rear admiral in the navy.

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