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Australia to be Included in Malabar Exercise

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Why in News

India is prepared to expand the **Malabar exercise** to also include Australia.

India and Australia are soon to be holding a **virtual summit** for better cooperation and strengthening bilateral ties.

Malabar Exercise

- It is an **annual trilateral naval exercise** between the navies of **India, Japan, and the USA** which is held **alternately in the Indian and Pacific Oceans**.
- It began as a bilateral naval exercise between **India and the USA in 1992** and was expanded into a trilateral format with the **inclusion of Japan in 2015**.
- Other exercises between India and Australia are **Pitch Black** and **AUSINDEX**.

Key Points

- Despite regular requests from Australia, **India resisted** issuing the invitation due to its concerns that the move would give the **appearance of a 'quadrilateral military alliance' aimed at China**.
 - However, the recent **India-China tensions** over the situation at the **Line of Actual Control** (LAC) may have brought more flexibility to the decision making process.
 - India is already a member of the **Quad** and attended the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue** held in November 2019.

Quad is the **informal strategic dialogue between India, the USA, Japan and Australia** with a shared objective to ensure and support a free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region.

- **Focus of the Virtual Summit:**
 - **Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.**

Both countries have a shared approach to a free, open, inclusive and prosperous **Indo-Pacific** which leads to a convergence of mutual interest in many areas.
 - **Strengthening of defence ties.**
 - A broader **maritime cooperation agreement** with a focus on **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** is also in the works.
 - Australia has agreed to post a **Liaison Officer** at the Indian Navy's **Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** at Gurugram.
 - Expected conclusion on **Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA)** to elevate the strategic partnership between **India and Australia.**
 - MLSA would allow reciprocal use of each other's military bases for exchange of fuel and provisions to simplify logistical support and improve operational turnaround.
 - India has **similar logistics support agreement with the USA** named **Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA).**
- **Background:**
 - Australia was the first country to submit a draft MLSA after **India signed the first such agreement with the USA in 2016.**
 - Initially, it was to be signed in 2019 and then in January 2020.

The events got postponed due to the **Australian forest fires** and then **Covid-19** pandemic.

Way Forward

- The two nations are at **very different levels of development** so there can be converging and diverging interests. Therefore, the future must be woven around the three pillars, which are **economic relationship, geostrategic congruence** and **people-to-people ties** and the glue that can bind this is a sustained momentum.
- India and Australia are wary of **China's assault** on maritime security and freedom of navigation **in the Indo-Pacific region.** Inclusion of Australia in Malabar exercise along with strengthening the idea of 'Quad' can therefore promote rule-based, open, free and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Source: TH