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Australia to Join Malabar Exercise

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Why in News

Recently, **Australia has agreed to join the Malabar Exercise** on India's request. The exercise is scheduled to be held in November 2020.

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**.
- The Exercise is **aimed to support free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific** and remain committed to a **rules based international order**.
- It is **also aimed at interoperability** with an emphasis on humanitarian assistance, surface war manoeuvres, anti-submarines warfare, counter-terror operations, gunnery training and aerial surveillance.

Key Points

- **2020 Malabar Exercise:**
 - The 2020 Exercise is expected to be held in the **Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea**. In 2019, the exercise was conducted off the coast of Japan.
 - Due to **Covid-19 pandemic** the exercise had been planned in a '**non-contact - at sea**' format.
 - **Its objective** is to enhance safety and security in the maritime domain.

- **Australia's Inclusion:**

- The issue of Australia's inclusion in Malabar had again come up for discussion at the **Quad** foreign ministers meet in Tokyo held in October 2020. Thereafter, India invited Australia to join the Exercise.

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.**

- The move will bolster the ability of India, Australia, Japan and the United States to work together to **uphold peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region.**
- It is also expected to further lay the foundations for the eventual **formalisation of the Quad grouping.**

- **Background:**

- 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.
 - In 2017, Australia had requested for observer status in the Malabar Exercise.
 - China has repeatedly expressed strong opposition to any expansion of the Malabar Exercise, which it sees as a multilateral naval construct designed to "counter and contain" it.
- However, the recent **India-China tensions** over the situation at the **Line of Actual Control** (LAC) may have brought more flexibility to India's decision making process.
- **Japan and the U.S.A also have been pressing India** for Australia's inclusion in Malabar Exercise.

- **Other Cooperation Between Quad Members:**

- India and Japan had signed a **military logistics agreement** in September, 2020.
- India has signed maritime information sharing agreements for **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** with Australia and Japan and a similar agreement is under discussion with the U.S.A.

MDA is defined by the **International Maritime Organization** as the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment of a country.

- India and U.S.A. are also stepping up efforts to conclude the **Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)** ahead of the **Indo-US 2+2 ministerial meeting** on 26-27 October, 2020.
 - BECA, a key military pact, will allow India to use U.S.A.'s geospatial intelligence and enhance accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones.
 - BECA is one of the **four foundational military communication agreements** between the two countries. The other three being **GSOMIA, LEMOA, CISMOA**.
 - **GSOMIA:** General Security Of Military Information Agreement
 - **LEMOA:** Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
 - **CISMOA:** Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement
 - Defence and Foreign ministers of the two countries will Participate at the 2+2 ministerial meeting.

Way Forward

- As India seeks to increase cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain, high-end military exercises like Malabar are key to enhancing maritime capabilities, building interoperability with its close partners, and demonstrating its collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- The fast-tracking of work on BECA and the decision of the four Quad countries to participate in the Malabar Exercise are perceived to be a strategic signal to an aggressive China.

Source: TH