

## India, Japan, US navies to conduct wargames

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Malabar exercise, seen as an effort by India, USA, and Japan navies to counter the growing challenge of China in the sea will be held from 25 September in Sasebo.

“The Malabar exercise will be held from 25th September to 4th October in Sasebo in Japan,” said a senior official.

The Malabar exercise started in 1992 as a bilateral one between the Indian Navy and the US Navy in the Indian Ocean. Japan became a permanent member of the Malabar exercise in 2015 as it faced deepening tensions with China over a dispute on East Asian island chain: Senkaku Islands.

Last year the exercise was held from 07 to 16 June at off the coast of Guam in the Western Pacific. This was the first time that the Malabar exercise was conducted off the coast of Guam, a US territory.

Indian Navy ships Sahyadri and anti-submarine warfare corvette, INS Kamorta, fleet tanker INS Shakti and surveillance aircraft P8I had participated in the exercise.

In recent years China Navy has been trying to increase its influence in the region raising concerns in the neighbouring countries. Recently there has been skirmishes between the Vietnam and China in the South China Sea where ONGC Videsh is engaged in oil exploration at Block 06.1.

India had asserted that said that South China Sea is part of the global commons and it firmly stands for the freedom of navigation and overflight, and unimpeded lawful commerce, in the international waters.”

China had objected to Indian presence in the South China Sea. However, despite China pressure Indian has been involved in activities in the region.

Earlier this month Indian Navy conducted bilateral exercise “Samudra Laksamana” with Malaysia Navy in the South China Sea.

## Production to resume soon: Aramco CEO

*Riyadh:* State-owned Saudi Aramco has emerged from attacks on its oil facilities "stronger than ever", CEO Amin Nasser told employees, adding full oil production would resume by the end of this month. The September 14 attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais plants halved the crude output of the world's top oil exporter. **REUTERS**

PETER APPS

**I**F IRAN'S GOVERNMENT was truly behind last weekend's cruise missile and drone attack on Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure, it has put its potential foes across the Middle East in an awkward, uncomfortable position.

Like suspected mine attacks on tanker shipping in the Gulf earlier in the year, the strike—which initially sent energy prices spiking—showed just how little those who ordered it care for the norms of international engagement, even by the standards of the restive Middle East. That's not a surprise: both Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and increasingly Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years. This attack, however, marked a serious escalation—particularly if US officials are correct when they say the missiles were launched from inside Iranian territory.

Perhaps predictably, President Donald Trump's response was bellicose in flavour, warning the United States was "locked and loaded" but putting the decision on whether or not it should strike firmly in Saudi Arabia's court. So far, Riyadh has shown little enthusiasm for that—it appears increasingly bogged down in a controversial, messy war in Yemen, and neither it nor Washington wants shooting in the Gulf. Amongst those in power in Tehran, the calculations appear more mixed. Outside experts increasingly suspect hardliners believe that since Trump tore up the Iran nuclear deal, they have less to lose. Even if the United States were to launch military action, it would almost certainly only be limited. Trump has made clear his opposition to major Mideast wars, and the departure of National Security Adviser John Bolton removes the only senior U.S. figure who backed them.

## Interventions

With China rising and Russia reasserting itself, the United States is now much less Mideast-focused—and also less dependent on its oil. The end of the era of Iraq-style interventions is broadly positive—not least because it had fuelled Tehran's appetite for a nuclear programme. That had itself proved destabilising, including increasing the risk of Israeli military action, and prompted the Obama administration's focus on a nuclear deal to stop it.

That approach was dramatically ditched by Trump, who tore up the Iran deal with no apparent concept of what to replace it with. Powerful forces in Tehran were already pursuing an agenda of destabilising the region with covert action. The new US approach handed them a chance for ascendancy in Iran's unending internal battle for domestic power, and removed what constraints they had once felt. Particularly over the last decade, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—and particularly its foreign-facing Quds Force under Major General Qassem Soleimani—has revelled in deniable actions across the Middle East and beyond.

Those actions included supporting insurgents attacking US and British forces in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen and backing Bashar al-Assad's government as it battle for control of Syria. That had fuelled some calls in Washington for the IRGC to be listed as a banned terror

# Iran's new Mideast game

Saudi oil attack shows how Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years



A damaged pipeline seen at Saudi Aramco oil facility in Khurais, Saudi Arabia

REUTERS

group—but doing so, as the Trump administration did earlier this year, seems just to have increased its appetite for action.

Iran has long had a sophisticated missile programme, and has been testing drones and supplying them to regional allies such as Hezbollah for years. This attack, however, showed significant recent progress. That the missiles were reportedly able to evade Saudi air defences by flying behind them demonstrates striking sophistication.

## Houthis

Yemen's Houthis dispute US claims the missiles and drones came from within Iranian territory, saying they were launched from within Yemen itself. Whatever the truth, the attack clearly represents a leap forward in both technology and the appetite to use it.

So far, damage to facilities belonging to Saudi oil firm Aramco appears limited—Saudi authorities say full produc-

tion will shortly be resumed. That's unlikely to bother anyone in Tehran significantly. They may well not have been looking for a knockout blow, but have demonstrated their ability to strike the most sensitive facilities in Saudi Arabia without warning. Other potential foes, including United Arab Emirates and Israel, will have noted that with some alarm.

Such behaviour, the United States and its allies clearly believe, must not be without consequences—and Tehran should be braced for another round of sanctions. Much of the challenge here, however, is keeping the hope of diplomacy alive, giving Iran incentives to moderate its behaviour and regain admittance to the wider international community. That was the strategy favoured by the Obama administration—and then ripped up by Trump without any discernible alternative. In a particularly counterproductive step, the United States then moved this year to sanction even relatively moderate

members of the government in Tehran, including foreign minister Mohammed Javad Zarif, its chief negotiator for the nuclear deal.

Without appetite for military action, boosting diplomatic efforts may be the only option—and European states in particular have been desperate to keep such options open. That included President Emmanuel Macron inviting foreign minister Zarif to the G7 summit this summer, much to the irritation of Trump and the US delegation. Nevertheless, US appetite for a new deal may quietly be increasing. Trump's new pick for National Security Advisor, former US chief hostage negotiator Robert O'Brien, has a very different background from the mercurial Bolton. The next US presidential election is barely a year away, and the current incumbent of the White House would rather have a reputation than for stopping wars than starting them.

—REUTERS

## HPL plant shut down after fire

**THE MANAGEMENT OF** Haldia Petrochemicals (HPL) on Saturday shut down its plant following the fire incident at its naphtha cracker unit (NCU).

Sources said the management has formed an advisory

committee comprising internal and external experts, which would determine the cause of the fire and the extent of damage caused.

The fire broke out at the company's Haldia plant in

West Bengal on Friday, leaving at least 15 people injured.

"The management will decide on when the plant could be made operational after the assessment of the committee," the sources said. —PTI

# India-funded refinery for Mongolia

New Delhi to shell out \$236 m in addition to \$1-bn credit line for project

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India has agreed to shell out an additional \$236 million to add to the \$1 billion line of credit to Mongolia for setting up an oil refinery.

Discussions on the refinery as well as diversifying the relationship into areas such as space and defence formed the crux of the joint statement after official-level talks with Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga, who is here on a five-day state visit.

However, there was a note of caution with the Mongolian side agreeing that it was of critical importance to finalise the transportation means and its timely completion for project to be success-



Mongolia President Khaltmaagiin Battulga at Taj Mahal. PTI

ful. India is understandably anxious to avoid the project becoming a white elephant and turning into political football because of the delicate domestic politics in Mongolia where China still holds considerable sway.

India stressed the importance of making raw material available for the refinery and building either the pipeline or alternate means in time by the time the refinery is completed. As of now, the line of credit is only for refinery and

not for the pipeline or any alternate option to bring crude to the refinery.

India is pacing out the development of ties with Mongolia after its attempt at acceleration had suffered a setback. PM Narendra Modi had visited Mongolia and made a slew of announcements. But China enforced a trade blockade after the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia. It relented only after receiving an apology from the then Foreign Minister.

The Mongolian President had met PM Modi a fortnight back at Vladivostok where they had discussed several projects. Importantly, Indian engineers will be working on a project that is at a short distance from a crucial Chinese arm of its One Belt One Road project.