

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Evolving Indo-Australian Strategic Co-operation in the Twenty-First Century

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Key Points

- As the world's focus shifts towards the Indo-Pacific, relations between two of the largest democracies in the region, India and Australia, will assume greater significance. The growing convergence of geopolitical interests was underlined by Prime Minister Julia Gillard's visit to India.
- Australia needs to continue "Looking West" into the Indian Ocean Region, towards Indonesia and India.
- Military co-operation between India and Australia could include co-operation in intelligence gathering and participation in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

Summary

As the world's focus shifts from Europe to the Indo-Pacific, the relationship between two of the largest democracies in the region, India and Australia, will assume greater significance. Recognition of this trend was confirmed, together with a growing convergence of shared geopolitical interests, during Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's visit to India in October 2012.

Both countries have tried to overcome irritants in their relationship, such as issues related to the security of Indian students in Australia and the long-awaited agreement on the supply of Australian uranium to India. They have instead tried to focus on the constants, such as their

common inheritance of a Westminster style of governance and the geopolitical changes produced by the rise of China.

Analysis

In addition to having its own “sphere of influence”, India is moving from being a middle power in South Asia to something more like a great power in the wider Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, Australia, an established middle power, is seeking to enhance its place in an increasingly contested region. It has taken some time for the two countries to pursue their strategic and diplomatic manoeuvrings to that extent, as it is normal for federal democratic countries to project their strategic power a bit later than, say, a unitary single party state, such as China.

Both India and Australia are pursuing their diplomatic conduct with a clear understanding that they have a vital stake in shaping the course of events in an Indo-Pacific century. Therefore, it is important for both to strengthen their already existing strategic relations.

The convergence of strategic threads in Indo-Australian relations in the twenty-first century can be clearly seen from an historic point of view. Even when India was under British colonial rule and Australia’s maritime boundaries, especially in the west, were protected by the Royal Navy, there was a shared interest in having an international system operating with English-speaking democracies at the helm, which effectively manifested itself in the form of open sea routes. Even in the twenty-first century, the situation has not changed all that much. It is in the national interest of both India and Australia to support the existing international order, under the aegis of a powerful United States.

Geostrategically, in the twentieth century importance was primarily on geostrategist Harold Mackinder’s assertion that: ‘... who controls eastern Europe rules the Heartland; who controls the Heartland rules the World Island; and who rules the World Island rules the World’. In the twenty-first century, thinking has shifted towards the version proposed by another geostrategist, Nicholas J. Spykman, who said: ‘... who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world’; in this version, the rimland includes the monsoon lands of Asia.

It is no exaggeration to say that Mackinder’s proposal influenced all the combatants in the two World Wars and the Cold War. The victors that emerged were primarily maritime powers, a fact that helped them to win. Now, however, with the rise of China as a major power, there has been a paradigm shift as it is considered to be both a maritime and a continental power.

Both India and Australia have excellent trade relations with China. But, politically, it is important that China, with its approaches to issues such as human rights and democracy, does not extend its “sphere of influence” too much, in a world that perceives a relative American decline. For New Delhi, China’s interest in Indian Ocean states such as the Maldives, which is currently experiencing renewed instability, arouses concern. Similarly, a

growing Chinese presence in the South Pacific Island countries has not gone unnoticed in Canberra.

From Australia's point of view, there is a need to start "Looking West" to the Indian Ocean, towards Indonesia and across to India. This aspect has been recognised by the Australian Government's Asian Century White Paper. Australian participation is welcomed in the regional multilateral summits in the Indian Ocean – one example is the South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC), in which Australia has observer status – but there is still a need for a deeper strategic engagement with the region, and especially with democratic countries, such as India.¹

Of course, both India and Australia, being federal democratic countries, face certain constraints in pursuing their strategic objectives. In a sense, diplomacy can sometimes be conducted with a view towards utopian concepts rather than realpolitik that might, under the right conditions, better serve the national interest.

For instance, in India's case, the sentiment that New Delhi should not join the power politics in the international arena and continue to follow a policy of non-alignment, still finds space among both the general population and the ruling élite, despite the end of the Cold War.

On the other hand, the issue of uranium sales to India has been seriously debated within the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The reason why India was not able to source uranium from Australia was because the ALP had a stated policy that uranium should not be sold to countries that are not signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Seemingly, India not being a member of the NPT is no longer an issue, following the decision of the United States to end India's nuclear isolation through the historic 123 Agreement (officially, the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement). India has also demonstrated consistent adherence to nuclear non-proliferation and sticks to the "No First Use" policy, as envisaged in its Nuclear Draft Doctrine. This could have worked in its favour when the topic of uranium sales was under consideration by the ALP.

Diplomatically, India could be accused of displaying apathy towards Australasia, as countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Fiji have not had one state visit from India in the past three decades.

There is a need to increase the bilateral diplomatic presence between India and Australia. There is also a need for regular military-to-military exchanges, especially among naval personnel. There is also a need for regular dialogue between the defence ministers of both countries and for a larger joint defence and security understanding between India, New Zealand, Australia and, of course, the United States.

Further military partnerships could include co-operation in intelligence gathering and participation in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism training and operations. India

¹ Chandramohan, B. and Buchanan, P.G., 'Assessment Brief: India Australia Strategic Co-operation in the Early 21st Century', 36th Parallel Assessments Ltd (NZ), 31 October 2012. <<http://36th-parallel.com/2012/10/assessment-brief-indian-australian-strategic-co-operation-in-the-early-21st-century/>>.

might also assist Australian security personnel with South Asian languages and cultural familiarisation, skills that are useful for counter-insurgency in the region. On that note, in Perth in July this year, a 1.5 Track Defence Strategic Dialogue between Australia and India was initiated, with the help of the Australian Department of Defence and Future Directions International. Many more such initiatives, at the Track 2 level, are needed.

In Conclusion

India and Australia have many commonalities and share a number of the same strategic concerns in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is now high time for both the Indian and Australian Governments to take the plunge and form a deeper strategic partnership, which will help to secure a stable future for the Indo-Pacific region in the twenty-first century.²

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² Mishra, R., 'India-Australia Strategic Relations: Moving to the Next Level', IDSA *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 36, № 4, July-August 2012, pp. 657-62.