

BLACK SWAN

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AUSTRALIA-INDIA DEFENCE AND SECURITY TIES: BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS FOR GROWTH

Authored by Dr. Stuti Bhatnagar



DEFENCE AND SECURITY THROUGH AN INDO-PACIFIC LENS



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Please direct inquiries to troy.lee-brown@uwa.edu.au

This publication can be downloaded at:

www.defenceuwa.com.au

UWA Defence and Security Institute

MO03, Maths Link Building (Bldg 223)

The University of Western Australia

35 Stirling Highway

Crawley WA 6009

Australia

For all general enquiries:

Email: defenceinstitute@uwa.edu.au

Tel: +61 8 6488 4742



Front Cover Image: Bridge crew of Indian Naval Submarine Vagir issue directions as the submarine arrives at Fleet Base West, Western Australia

About the author and editors



Dr Troy Lee-Brown

The Black Swan Strategy Papers are edited by Dr. Troy Lee-Brown, Research Fellow at the UWA Defence and Security Institute. Dr. Troy Lee-Brown is also the author of this issue.

A researcher in regional security, maritime security and international relations with a focus on the Indo-Pacific, he is currently the Project Manager for 'Blue Security', a joint Defence and Security Institute-La Trobe Asia-Griffith Asia Institute-UNSW Canberra

project which focuses on issues of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

Troy has authored several journal papers with a focus on security issues in the Indo-Pacific, regionalism and maritime security. His research interests include the Indo-Pacific, India, Japan, Indian Ocean Region and maritime security.

(E) troy.lee-brown@uwa.edu.au



Fiona Considine

Fiona is the inaugural Business Manager for the UWA Defence and Security Institute. As Business Manager, she is responsible for the high-level planning, coordination and execution of all DSI programs, stakeholder engagement and outreach activities. She has over 20 years' experience in Event and

Program Management which has provided the platform and expertise for the brand development, engagement and profile building for DSI. Fiona is the Creative Director of the Black Swan Strategy Paper and oversees its design and content.

(E) defenceinstitute@uwa.edu.au



About the author

Stuti Bhatnagar is a Sessional Academic at the University of New South Wales in Sydney and a visiting researcher at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. With a PhD in politics and international relations from the University of Adelaide, her research focuses on the examination of Indian foreign policy and South

Asian politics. Her research involves a closer look at the domestic determinants of India's foreign policy with several peer-reviewed academic publications to her credit. She is the author of India's Pakistan Policy: How Think Tanks Are Shaping Foreign Relations published by Routledge in 2021.

Twitter: [@bhatnagarstuti](https://twitter.com/bhatnagarstuti)



About the Black Swan Strategy Papers

The *Black Swan Strategy Papers* are the flagship publication of the UWA Defence and Security Institute (DSI). They represent the intersection between Western Australia and strategic studies – both of which are famous for their black swans. The series aims to provide high-quality analysis and strategic insights into the Indo-Pacific region through a defence and security lens, with the hope of reducing the number of 'black swan' events with which Australian strategy and Indo-Pacific security has to contend. Each of the Black Swan Strategy Papers are generally between 5,000 and 15,000 words and are written for a policy-oriented audience. The Black Swan Strategy Papers are commission works by the UWA DSI by invitation only.

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	7
INTRODUCTION	8
CHAPTER 1: IDEAS	9
CHAPTER 2: DOMESTIC ACTORS	12
CHAPTER 3: POLICY CHANGE	15
CHAPTER 4: RECURRING CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE COLLABORATION	17
CONCLUSION	19
ENDNOTES	20



Executive Summary

Australia's relationship with India has grown significantly over the past decade. Broad engagement between the two sides is at an all-time high, visible in increasing cooperation in defence and security, trade, cultural partnerships and education. The increased collaboration is owing to the significant effort, investment, and persistence by key political and diplomatic actors in collaboration with civil society. The visible convergence of interests between the two countries is also buttressed by the acknowledgement of common security concerns and the broad positioning within their common regional as well as broader global environment. This has manifested in increased contact, substantive policy decisions to augment defence and security capabilities, joint military efforts in the Indian Ocean and in the wider Indo-Pacific context. Overall, the increased momentum in the partnership between Australia and India is a byproduct of the visible recalibration of the geopolitical value that they hold for each other's defence and security interests. Despite the shared optimism, however, there are apparent limits and challenges ahead for Australia-India defence and security cooperation. Jointly, both Australia and India, as leading maritime powers in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific regions, need to better utilise cooperative mechanisms such as the Logistics support agreement and the Comprehensive Security Partnership. As a leading Indian Ocean maritime power, Australia needs to take better cognisance of India's security interests in the region to improve joint patrolling and maritime exercises. While there is agreement on common security threats from a potentially disruptive China, more



↑ Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi welcomes H. E. Mr. Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia for the 1st India-Australia Annual Summit at Hyderabad House. Photo credit: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

could be done to jointly address challenges to capacity building. Politically too, agendas and positions need to be clarified, recognising individual political sensitivities with regards to collective defence mechanisms, the projection of political postures and the appetite for risk – particularly visible in the Indian case, as exemplified in India's position on the Ukraine crisis. The current emphasis on building a multi-stakeholder partnership can help to provide much needed clarity on political positions and operational needs, while protecting common security interests in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific regions.



Policy recommendations

- Australia and India can do more with their 2020 logistics support agreement, working beyond pre-planned exercises and sporadic deployments to include aspects such as the replenishment of warships and military aircraft. There is potential for collaboration between Australian and Indian defence manufacturers and researchers to improve military capabilities. This could include cooperation in areas of mutual interest including cyber security and surveillance and reconnaissance.
- WA's potential in contributing to shipbuilding, ship repair and maintenance, and aircraft maintenance and repair could be further explored.
- A sharper clarity is needed within this multi-stakeholder engagement to take better cognisance of political challenges, for instance, Indian risk calculations regarding involvement in collective defence arrangements or the overall position within the international order. This can be achieved through a more critical scrutiny of political interests that goes beyond the expressed enthusiasm of the relationship. While governments focus on achievements on policy matters, other interlocutors including civil society need to expand research and debate on problematic areas of the relationship.

↓ Indian Navy Captain Ajitendra Kant Singh, Commanding Officer Indian Naval Air Squadron 312 and Royal Australian Air Force Squadron Leader Johnathan Logan exchange gifts at Indian Navy Air Station Rajali in Tamil Nadu, India during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 23.



Introduction

The relationship between Australia and India is at a critical juncture, amid a deepening of bilateral ties and proactive efforts to engage within a broader regional partnership in the strategically vital Indo-Pacific. Broad engagement between the two sides is at an all-time high, with defence and security, trade, cultural partnerships and education all being key areas of collaboration. The relationship has received a further boost with several reciprocal high-profile visits by top leadership amid strong declarations of a growing partnership based on 'shared history', 'shared strategic interests' and 'shared values'.¹ Despite the optimism, however, the relationship has not always been an easy one and it has taken significant effort, investment and persistence to achieve this level of cooperation in the current partnership.

This paper examines the Australia-India defence and security ties, uncovering key drivers and drawing attention to important questions that continue to animate analyses. The

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paper is divided into three parts, with a focus on ideas, actors and policy change. Such an approach helps to draw out continuing challenges and opportunities, both in substantive aspects amid critical convergence on defence and security, and in declaratory elements that capture popular attention, adding to the growing optimism surrounding this partnership. While the optimism is warranted, a focus on ideas that drive the relationship and actors that contribute to discourse offers

a nuanced view that is equally cognisant of problem areas and challenges that are likely to affect Australia-India relations going forward.

Obviously divergent issues will continue to require careful consideration moving forward. These include the understanding of regional structures and order, and the clear tension between India's strategic autonomy and Australia's alliance commitments.



¹ Indian Armed Forces and Australian Defence Force personnel on the flight deck of HMAS Adelaide in Sydney, NSW.

CHAPTER 1

Ideas

In beginning to unravel the public attention to and celebration of Australia-India relations, it is important to consider the fundamental ideas about defence and security that guide this partnership.

This section highlights the historical evolution of the Australia-India security partnership, identifying key landmarks. It specifically emphasises two critical factors that have brought Australia and India closer – India’s improved relationship with the United States (US) and the shared interest in containing China in the region – that has collectively transformed how the two states think about each other, leading to a convergence on policy in defence and security.

Historically, despite a legacy of cooperation as comrades during World War 1 in Gallipoli², since India’s independence in 1947, Australia and India have held differing foreign policy approaches. Most notably during the Cold War, Australia was keenly involved in its alliance with the US and India remained persistent about its non-aligned stance.³ Despite the cliched description of the relationship being driven by the “three Cs – cricket, curry and Commonwealth”, – analysts have agreed that the relationship remained ‘neglected’ and ‘in a large measure weak and shallow’.⁴

Australia’s sharp reaction to India’s nuclear tests in 1998 was a further obstacle in the development of defence and security ties. This was reflected most overtly in Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s statement in 1998 condemning India’s nuclear position as a “grotesque status symbol”.⁵ According to Howard,

...what the Indian Government has done is to play fast and loose with international safety and security in the interests of a short-term domestic political game. India’s behaviour, of course, has gravely compromised her previous claims to exercise the role of an international moral policeman.⁶

Subsequent Australian decisions, including recalling the High Commissioner and Defence Advisor and suspending defence cooperation, in the government’s own assessments, ‘cast a shadow over Australia’s relations with India’ and were detrimental to developing an understanding of each other’s defence capabilities and possibilities for defence cooperation.⁷

Tensions eased in the 2000s with several high-profile interactions, including Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer’s visit to India in March 2000, the beginning of defence talks in May 2000, Howard’s landmark visit to India in July 2000 and the initiation of the India-Australia strategic dialogue in August 2001. India’s economic growth, its increasingly modernising military and ‘potential benefits from [future] exchanges in military doctrine and technical expertise’ made it attractive to Australia’s defence establishment.⁸ Howard’s subsequent visit in 2006 and the ensuing Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation recognised India’s potential to ‘contribute positively to...[Australia’s] strategic interests’.⁹ This was followed significantly by the decision to expand the Malabar exercises in 2007 to include Australia.¹⁰ In May 2007, the Howard government also decided to involve Australia in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) along with India, Japan and the USA.¹¹ The message at this stage was clear: India was considered a positive partner that Australia could engage with militarily.¹²

India’s defence partnership with Australia grew stronger with the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed in November 2009. The Australian Government also released

the 2009 Defence White Paper that signalled a keen desire to strengthen security ties with New Delhi.¹³ Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith engaged in the annual defence minister’s dialogue in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Additionally, bilateral dialogues, including Army and Defence Policy Talks initiated in 2010, became more frequent. Recognising the need to deepen the relationship beyond official channels, Australia and India also established a 1.5 Track Defence Strategic Dialogue to facilitate discussions. Engagement also broadened at the multilateral level with leadership positions as chair and vice-chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2011-2013, working together to introduce maritime-security-related issues onto IORA’s agenda. Australia also joined the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an initiative of the Indian Navy and a forum for the discussion of regional maritime security issues among navies of littoral states in the Indian Ocean.¹⁴

Despite the increased frequency of contact, Australia’s longstanding ban on selling uranium to India remained an irritant in the relationship until the ban was lifted by the Julia Gillard administration in November 2011. Prime Minister Gillard’s proactive advocacy of India’s record on nuclear non-proliferation along with the emphasis on improving relations with the emerging economic superpower and the ‘world’s largest democracy’ made a further positive impact.¹⁵

The convergence on economic and defence interests has largely continued since the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India in 2014. New engagements during this period manifested in the Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2014, Modi’s much publicised visit to Australia in 2014 and the initiation of the AUSINDEX – a major biennial maritime exercise in 2015, of critical importance to increasing defence ties and a prominent display of defence

collaboration and consolidation of the security partnership.¹⁶ The following years were witness to further reaffirmation of Australia's pledge to seek a 'first order' partnership with India.¹⁷ Australia and India convened no fewer than 38 bilateral security dialogues or joint military exercises in 2018, compared to just 11 in 2014.¹⁸ However, despite the expectations of a stronger economic relationship, the two governments failed to secure a free trade agreement owing largely to slow economic growth in Modi's first term and existing protections within the Indian economy in key sectors, such as agriculture and education.¹⁹ With fewer protections with regard to defence engagement, defence partnership during this period continued, reflecting increased trust.

Bilateral developments received a boost from Modi's overwhelming electoral victory and renewed diplomatic engagement since 2019. High-profile initiatives included the adoption of a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia's involvement in the development of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, and a virtual summit in June 2020.²⁰ Additionally, the two countries signed a logistics support agreement to facilitate humanitarian and disaster-relief efforts and joint exercises and upgraded the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).²¹ The increased engagement also notably led to Australia rejoining the Malabar exercise in October 2020 and the decision to upgrade the Secretaries 2+2 dialogue to the ministerial level.²² While there are arguments that the CSP was short in substance, an alternative view is that it helped to restart negotiations for the economic deal as expressed by Australian PM Scott Morrison who noted that, "this agreement has been built on our strong security partnership and our joint efforts in the Quad, which has created the opportunity for our economic relationship to advance to a new level."²³

While political will and investment at the bilateral level has played a big part in these developments, two external factors have significantly affected the dynamics between

Australia and India. The first is the improvement in India-US relations that has played a direct role in improving India's defence partnerships with Australia and beyond. Secondly, the common threat of an assertive China has brought Australia and India closer, significantly enhancing the geopolitical value of both in their shared regions and leading to shared ideas for much-needed cooperation.

US factor

While driven equally by a desire for an independent and diversified defence posture, Australia's changing trajectory with India has closely followed the improvements in US-India relations.²⁴ Despite the initial negative reactions to India's nuclear tests, events in the following years significantly changed Australian discourse on India as a nuclear power. These included Australia's recognition of India as a responsible nuclear power and the US-India nuclear deal in 2005, which was followed closely by the 10-year Defence Framework Agreement, signalling Washington's determination to make India a strategic partner.²⁵ As India's ties with the US improved, it became increasingly identified in Australia as a substantial part of the Indo-Pacific and subsequently found multiple mentions in the Gillard government's Asian Century White Paper in 2012.²⁶ The 2013 Defence White Paper that followed further emphasised the India-inclusive Indo-Pacific terminology and welcomed India's emergence as a 'global power'.²⁷ Additionally, Australia, India and the US, along with Japan, revived the Quad in 2017 with a renewed commitment to address joint security concerns and establish a collaborative framework that ranged from the provision of public goods and humanitarian assistance to an agenda to 'meet challenges to the maritime order in the East and South China Seas'.²⁸

Notwithstanding the repeated emphasis on shared security concerns and India's recognition as a vital partner in both the US and Australian strategic imaginations, there continue to be differences in the way the Indo-Pacific is envisioned, particularly with regard to US centrality within this

strategic framing. India's preference is for strategic autonomy and multipolarity and it is reluctant to form a traditional military alliance with one dominant superpower.²⁹ Australia on the other hand is comfortable if not keen to maintain the US presence and centrality within the Indo-Pacific.³⁰ This highlights the probable limits of this strategic convergence, particularly when called to respond to regional security threats and adopting a collective security response.

This became clear in the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and India's continued refusal to denounce or sanction Russia for its aggression like its partners in the Quad. As the largest importer of Russian arms, India's continued reliance on Russia for advanced weapons has been a critical factor here.³¹ Strategically, too, India is wary of Russia's increased partnership with China and has consequently continued its engagements with Russia bilaterally and multilaterally hoping to accommodate Russia and to stall any Russia-China collusion.³² India continues to reaffirm its "stable and friendly ties" with Russia and has also expressed caution on the West's [read US's] approach of "railroad[ing] Russia to a single option", i.e. China.³³ Despite initial disappointment by Quad partners for "fence-sitting" and being "shaky" in acting against Russia, for now, they have accepted India's predicament. Yet, India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Modi's public meetings with Putin continue to make Quad partners uncomfortable and are likely to create tensions in the future.³⁴

Ukraine's case highlights India's preference for multipolarity and desire to retain flexibility in its partnerships. It brings increased focus to continuing constraints on India's ability to be a part of collective defence arrangements in the region. A mention of the AUKUS arrangement between the US, UK and Australia is needed here, specifically with regard to debates about overlapping strategies and India's response. Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla emphasised that "the [AUKUS] deal was a strategic alliance among the three Anglo-Saxon powers and therefore irrelevant since it would have no impact on the functioning of the Quad." However,

there are concerns about AUKUS's "exclusive membership" that leaves out two crucial Quad countries – India and Japan.³⁵ Of particular concern to India is the provocative tone that AUKUS represents against China and the possibility of a Chinese reaction in the Indian Ocean. India is also uneasy about the precedent that AUKUS sets, with the US providing technology and material for nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. This could spur other similar relationships to move in the same direction, for instance the nuclear collaboration between China and Pakistan.

However, more positive assessments note that in the long term, AUKUS will be 'complementary to the Quad and other minilateral partnerships' and offers a pathway to 'building a larger number of coalitions with shared political ideals and strategic interests and [will have] the net effect of generating larger political and strategic consensus' and could address India's need to maintain diverse partnerships without 'any immediate responsibility to step up and commit to an explicitly anti-China security framework'.³⁶

China threat

Shared concerns about China's presence in the region remain another dominant driver of the growing Australia-India partnership, manifesting most directly in their engagements in the Indian Ocean despite some divergence in identifying the common domain. For Australia, the stated priority areas are the Pacific Ocean, South-East Asia and the North-East Indian Ocean but India's focus is on the entire Indian Ocean including its westernmost edges. India is deeply concerned about China's involvement in port infrastructure along the western Indian Ocean, including in Djibouti, Kenya, Madagascar and Tanzania. The expanding Chinese economic, security and political presence in the island states of Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar is also greatly concerning for India, a worry that India wants to receive more focus from its partners in the Quad, including Australia.³⁷

Security concerns with regard to Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean have led to convergence between Australia and India and the adoption of a 'shared maritime geography' – an idea actively emphasised by India through its engagement with multilateral groupings including the IORA and the IONS.³⁸ Considerable effort has been made to build military interoperability and develop joint capacity in maritime domain awareness through 'advanced exchange of information'.³⁹ This collaboration has been extended to the Quad level with the adoption of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness at the Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo in 2022.⁴⁰

Despite shared apprehensions, as the only Quad country that shares a contentious land border with China, India remains ambivalent on optics regarding China and wary of openly identifying Chinese aggressions in its sphere of influence in South-East

Asia.⁴¹ India has maintained a long-standing neutrality on competing territorial claims in South-East Asia and the South China Sea and does not support US led Freedom of Navigation Operational Patrols (FONOP) in the area.⁴² While Australia does not conduct FONOP of its own, it supports the US-led drills in principle, highlighting a divergence from the Indian position.

As this section highlights, improvements in Australia-India relations are as much a product of changes in perceptions as the shift in contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Shared concerns about Beijing's intentions and increasing US-India cooperation have arguably added to the strategic value of Canberra's engagements with New Delhi, leading to new patterns of defence and security engagement. Yet, while ideas continue to evolve, there is visible dissonance regarding international positions that are likely to affect the extent of collaboration in the future.



↑ Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Sochi, Russia. Photo credit: www.kremlin.ru

CHAPTER 2

Domestic actors

While ideas guiding the growing defence and security partnership are important, so is a focus on domestic political actors that have collectively offered platforms for the discussion of those ideas as well as produced knowledge on the finer aspects of cooperation.

Domestic actors of note include political and diplomatic representatives, think tanks, media, diaspora and other cultural and educational communities. The dynamics of federal and state politics have also been instrumental in drawing attention to key aspects of defence and security cooperation.

Leadership and diplomatic actors

While much attention has been paid to the ‘Modi moment’ in creating the momentum for Australia-India relations, early initiatives by Defence and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith or prime ministers Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd and John Howard have also been acknowledged.⁴³ Cumulatively, they paved the way for Australia to begin to engage with India, shifting the narrative to a recognition of India’s economic and military potential for Australia. In India, these early overtures helped to restore Australia’s image as a trustworthy partner, enabling substantive policy platforms on which subsequent defence and security relations could be built.

A considerable boost to the relationship was given by Howard’s much-publicised visit to India in July 2000 and the initiation of the strategic dialogue and the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Subsequently, Gillard’s advocacy for India as a reliable nuclear power fundamentally shifted the narrative on India. During her visit to India in 2012, accompanied by Australia’s National Security Adviser, Gillard emphasised the relevance of ongoing naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and proposed more military cooperation with India in the future.⁴⁴ Subsequent

leadership in Australia was keen to benefit from India’s economic transformation, promised by Modi’s election in 2014, while India desired multiple partnerships to counter China’s growing influence. This was complementary to India’s role within the broader framing of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Together, these calculations created a bipartisan consensus on the viability of a bilateral defence partnership, described succinctly by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott during his 2014 India visit. Lauding India’s leadership as an Indo-Pacific power, Abbott stated that, Australian and Indian “strategic and security” interests in the region’s “stability and prosperity” were “converging as never before”.⁴⁵ In India, too, Modi’s overwhelming popularity and his command over the electorate have ensured continued momentum on Australia-India relations. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and other senior leaders have made several visits to Australia in the past few years, signalling a strong commitment to building the relationship.

The optimism in the relationship has expanded interactions to include regular meetings between defence ministers and the annual 2+2 dialogue between the foreign and defence ministers. Diplomatic appointees have also reflected an active interest in building the strategic partnership. Proactive advocacy by diplomats including Peter Varghese during the Howard years or that of Harinder Sidhu during the Turnbull-Morrison period further helped to sustain Australian Government overtures towards India. In his role as Secretary of DFAT and later as Australia’s High Commissioner to India from 2009-2012, Varghese’s proactive efforts, for

instance, emphasised geoeconomics as a driving force for Australian strategy and ‘reinforc[ed] India’s [role] as a strategic partner’.⁴⁶ Varghese later authored the *India Economic Strategy to 2035*, commissioned by the Turnbull government, with concrete ideas to transform Australia’s relationship with India.⁴⁷ The subsequent appointment of Barry O’Farrell, a former Liberal politician, as Australia’s High Commissioner to India in November 2019, further reflected the bipartisan consensus within Australia.⁴⁸

Defence diplomacy, visible in military-to-military relationships fostered through military exercises such as Malabar, AUSINDEX and AUSTRAHIND, has also been an important driver.⁴⁹ There is also a long history of joint training in defence academic institutions, including India’s Defence Services Staff College, National Defence College and Australia’s Command and Staff College, Defence and Strategic Studies course and Capability and Technology Management College. This joint training has been used to good effect to improve communication and build sustainable relationships. More recently, in 2023 India started the General Rawat India-Australia Young Defence Officer Exchange Program that ‘offers the opportunity each year for fifteen young officers from across Army, Navy, and Air Force, to learn more about each other’s training, operational environments and culture’ and is aimed at ‘establish[ing] long-lasting bonds between the future strategic leaders of each nation’.⁵⁰

Think tanks

Complementing the role of political leaders and diplomats, think tanks have also been a notable vehicle influencing Australia and India’s defence and security policy. Collectively, think tanks have provided traction to frameworks on which the current Australia-India relationship is based, including the emphasis on the



↑ Members of ship's company line the upper decks onboard HMAS Warramunga as the ship prepares to come alongside the Port of Visakhapatnam, India.

Indo-Pacific and maritime security in the Indian Ocean from the mid-to-late 2000s onwards. Early emphasis on the Indian Ocean for instance, has been a steady focus of think tanks such as the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) affiliated with the Indian Navy.⁵¹ Other Indian think tanks such as the Research and Information System for Developing Countries instituted a program on the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) before its inception in 1997. It has represented India as the nodal point in the IORA Academic Group (IORAG) and played a key role in steering IORAG activities during India's stint as chair during 2011-12.⁵²

In the contemporary period, think tanks have magnified the prevalent narratives and provided avenues for

the discussion of key initiatives such as the CSP and the various defence exercises, trainings and dialogues developed jointly. Through their existing networks with government institutions such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Prime Minister's Office in India; and DFAT and Department of Defence in Australia, think tanks have provided direct policy inputs and been involved in multi-track dialogues.⁵³ Think tank events have provided a platform for multistakeholder participation and public debates on the evolving defence and security relationship.⁵⁴ Popular think tank events have contributed to public debate on the growing partnership, including the prominent Raisina Dialogue,

organised annually by India's Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in collaboration with the MEA; and Raisina in Sydney, organised in 2023 in collaboration with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Australian and Indian policymakers have, in turn, used think tanks as a platform to promote and amplify policy narratives and cooperative engagements as they evolve with respect to the Quad and the Indian Ocean.⁵⁵

Think tanks have also provided platforms for the conduct of multi-track dialogues. For instance, the Quad Tech Network – an initiative of the Australian Government brings together research institutions in Australia including the National Security Council, the ORF in India,

the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Japan and the Centre for a New American Security in the US for research on key issues facing the region. The India Foundation based in New Delhi has been organising the annual Indian Ocean Conference since 2016, the latest iteration of which was hosted by the Australia-based Perth USAsia Centre in collaboration with DFAT in February 2024. ORF also started a new Quad think tank forum in 2024 and a think tank exchange has been funded through the Maitri Fellowships offered by the Centre for Australia-India relations, open only to members of a select group of think tanks.⁵⁶

Other domestic interlocutors

The shifting discourse on Australia-India relations is helped also by domestic economic and defence sector developments. Western Australia (WA), for instance, has been pushing for advanced maritime manufacturing as Australia's only Indian Ocean-facing state. Its geographical location makes WA very relevant to the growing strategic convergence and rising national defence expenditures of Australia and India. WA's HMAS *Stirling* naval base has increasingly been used for the conduct of joint activities, for instance, in hosting Indian Navy submarine *INS Vagir*, the first Indian submarine deployed to Australia in August 2023.

Key leaders from WA have been active promoters of the Indo-Pacific framing and the elevation of India as an important partner for Australia.⁵⁷ These include former Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, WA Governor and former Labor Party leader Kim Beazley, former WA Senator Julie Bishop (former Foreign Minister). These actors have also argued for WA's relevance to building defence ties with India and the relevance to Indian Ocean defence for Australian strategy. In his first speech as Minister for Foreign Affairs, for instance, Smith highlighted his own regional roots, "as Member of Parliament for Perth, I look at the world from a Western Australian perspective...for the future...Western Australia looks naturally to the Indian Ocean. When the sun sets in the West, it sets on the Indian Ocean, not the Pacific."⁵⁸

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Beazley too has often argued for strengthened relations with India, particularly considering the rise of China's strategic powerplay in the region.⁵⁹

Other Australian states and territories also retain relevance as crucial points for cooperation with India. Darwin, for instance, continues to host the multilateral Kakadu exercises, which include participants from South-East Asia and the Western Pacific such as Japan. India has participated in these exercises too, with *INS Sahyadri* in 2018 and *INS Satpura* and a maritime patrol aircraft of the Indian Navy in 2022. In September 2021, the Northern Territory also hosted the biennial AUSINDEX maritime warfare exercises between the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Indian Navy.

Within India too, special effort is being made to connect India's coastal states to the broader framing and cooperative mechanisms within the Indian Ocean. In June 2003, an Australian Navy frigate, HMAS *Adelaide*, visited Chennai, coinciding with a visit to India by the Maritime Commander of the RAN as a symbol of the constructive defence relationship between Australia and India.⁶⁰ Australian P-8A aircraft have also made visits to other Indian states including to Goa and Tamil Nadu in 2023 for anti-submarine warfare drills.⁶¹ The Indian Navy participated in various fleet reviews around the world, including in Australia in 1988 (*INS Godavari* and *INS Varuna*) and 2013 (*INS Sahyadri*).⁶² In February 2016, India hosted the second International Fleet Review at Vishakhapatnam on the east coast of India. The fleet reviews are an important component of maritime diplomacy and projection of India's maritime power.⁶³ Additionally, the Indian Government has used the fleet review as a soft power tool to introduce India's diverse

culture, with planned events during the period of the review.⁶⁴

Coastal states in India are also given to benefit from the Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership (AIPOIP) – a non-treaty-based mechanism to develop collaborative solutions to common ocean challenges. This sits under the CSP and the joint declaration on a shared vision for maritime cooperation, with Australia taking the lead in the field of marine ecology while India leads the maritime security pillar.⁶⁵ Even though Australia's contribution focuses on marine ecology, it offers an opportunity to establish further relationships, for instance with regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. India's own IPOI aims to 'broaden the Indo-Pacific narrative by including a varied range of problems and possibilities that go beyond traditional security threats and geostrategic concerns'. A key aspect of the IPOI is that of littoral security, with a specific focus on 'shared littoral spaces'.⁶⁶ India has also launched an Indian Ocean Region-Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR), which has established linkages with over 18 countries and 15 maritime security agencies, including from Australia.

As this section emphasises, despite the patchy history, considerable momentum in the Australia-India relationship has been created and amplified by the continued advocacy of relevant domestic actors, particularly political and diplomatic leadership and think tanks. Specific interventions by individual states and territories have added further nuance to the deepening Australia-India relations, enabling exploration of collaborative opportunities beyond formal federal politics.

CHAPTER 3

Policy change

At the policy level, the growing affinity between Australia and India has led to the creation of a multi-stakeholder framework of engagement that includes a combination of mutual agreements, dialogue structures and increased interactions in joint trainings and military exercises.

These are aimed at building military interoperability and domain awareness across all three services, as this section will elaborate. Collectively these interactions have added to operational knowledge and provided platforms to explore further opportunities for cooperation. This section highlights some of these policy achievements while also underlining certain operational and political challenges that continue to be of concern and need to be resolved effectively for more substantive policy change.

Maritime focus

As the two largest maritime powers of the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean, Australia and India have a proactive focus on maritime security in their cooperation. Both countries share an interest in maintaining security in the Indian Ocean, with a reliance on freedom of navigation for trade and energy supply, and a need for secure and uninterrupted sea lanes of communication. In keeping with the maritime focus, in 2003 Australia began its participation in the Indian Navy's biennial *Milan* (congregation) exercises at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The engagement has continued in its most recent iteration in February 2024 during *Milan 24*, hosted by India in the port city of Visakhapatnam, that brought together approximately 50 nations and around 20 international vessels and aircraft from across the Indo-Pacific. Pursuing the theme 'Camaraderie, Cohesion, Collaboration', the goal of these exercises is to facilitate knowledge sharing and offer 'advanced maritime training, including anti-submarine, anti-surface and anti-air warfare exercises along with large force maritime manoeuvres'.⁶⁷

Other cooperative mechanisms on the naval front have included the Indian INS *Sahyadri's* participation in Australia's International Fleet Review in 2013 and Australia's inclusion with an Adelaide-class guided-missile frigate during India's International Fleet Review in the Bay of Bengal in February 2016. India's INS *Vagir* – indigenously manufactured and India's first submarine to visit Australia – participated in various exercises with the RAN units on the West Coast of Australia in September 2023.⁶⁸ Australia and India also participate in AUSINDEX, which was held most recently in August 2023 and included INS *Sahyadri* and INS *Kolkata* along with HMAS *Choules* and HMAS *Brisbane* from the RAN. Besides ships and their integral helicopters, the exercise also included fighter aircraft and maritime patrol aircraft, underscoring the shared interest in security maritime routes in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹

Regional cooperative efforts are reflected in the multilateral Malabar naval exercises that Australia has been a part of since 2020, bringing together the four Quad partners and 'demonstrating a collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific'.⁷⁰ Australia hosted Exercise Malabar in 2023, which witnessed the participation of India's INS *Sahyadri* and INS *Kolkata*. These exercises showcase naval preparedness and seek to engender trust. While officials claim that they are not directed against a particular country, it is clear that the collaborative exercises seek to act as a deterrent against any potential Chinese misadventure in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific.⁷¹ In 2023, for instance, Japanese and Indian navy vessels made a stop in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea on the way to Sydney, in a clear signal to China.⁷²

Army-to-army engagement

Defence cooperation extends to other services as well. The Australian and Indian armies hold the annual AUSTRAHIND bilateral exercises, hosted alternatively by Australia and India. Leading up to AUSTRAHIND 2023, Australia's 13th Brigade – the Indian Ocean-facing representative of the Army hosted the Australia-India army-to-army staff talks in October 2023. The focus of the interactions was a review of Australia's 'Defence Strategic Review, the Australian Army's move towards a littoral-focused combined arms fighting system, the accelerated delivery of long-range fires capabilities and joint integration'.⁷³ For India, the army remains crucially important, partly owing to its size but also considering the border conflict with China. The relationship between the two armies has evolved from an earlier focus on building links, conducting joint military education and building niche skills to now practising operational manoeuvres. There is significant scope for this relationship to expand in how to train and foster cohesion. A recent Memorandum of Understanding between the Australian Army Research Centre and the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, the think tank of the Indian Army, is a positive sign for future collaboration.

Air force

The air forces participate in Exercise PITCHBLACK – a mega-multilateral air-combat exercise initiated by the RAAF. In its most recent iteration in August 2022, four Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter jets and two C-17 heavy-lift aircraft of the Indian Air Force joined a 17-nation air combat exercise in Australia's Northern Territory, to 'undertake multi-domain air combat missions in a complex environment and exchange best practices with the participating air forces'.⁷⁴ India, too, has initiated its first multilateral exercise called Exercise Tarang Shakti, to debut in 2024. Australia has committed to participate in these exercises, emphasising as noted, 'the multidimensionality of Services level cooperation'.⁷⁵



↑ Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, DSC, CSC, OAM and Warrant Officer - Air Force, Warrant Officer Ralph Clifton meet with Indian Air Force Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman and Nicobar Command, Air Marshal Saju Balakrishnan for bilateral engagements during Exercise Pitch Black 2024, Darwin.

Regional engagement

Services-level cooperation has also included regional engagement. This includes Australia's flagship regional engagement activity, the Indo-Pacific Endeavour (IPE), which 'supports the Australian Government's focus on deepening diplomatic and defence partnerships across Southeast Asia and the Northeast Indian Ocean, and reinforces Australia's commitment to a peaceful, secure and prosperous region'.⁷⁶ For India, the participation of neighbouring Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh is crucial for its security interests in South Asia. Indian participation in IPE 2022 included a visit to the city of Vishakhapatnam and to Darwin. In IPE 2022, joint maritime interoperability training was conducted between a RAAF P-8A Poseidon and an Indian Navy P-8I Neptune in India. These engagements further underscore the emphasis on the Indian Ocean and the consistent efforts to explore potential for collaboration.

In keeping with this goal, in July 2023, several aircraft from the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force made a groundbreaking visit to Australia's Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an important first step in beginning to give each other access to military facilities in the Indian Ocean.⁷⁷ Conducting these exercises in different states and territories also fit the emphasis on involving coastal states mentioned in previous sections. In addition to the operational aspect, the IPE, described by some as 'floating diplomacy' and an 'exercise in force projection' has included active participation by academic engagements and think tank interactions sponsored in 2022 by Australia's High Commission in India.⁷⁸

Collaboration in research and development

Military exercises are complemented by collaboration in defence-sector research and development. A joint working group between India's

Defence Research Development Organisation and Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group has been in motion since 2018. This has been made possible by the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement signed in 2020 and facilitates interaction between the defence research organisations. This has also enabled better bilateral investment in the ongoing Australia-India Strategic Research Fund and the Australia-India Innovation and Technology Challenge, encouraging collaborative research on science, innovation and technology. Artificial intelligence and machine learning have been included as the priority focus in the current round and there is potential to expand the focus to collaboration in defence technology in the future.

CHAPTER 4

Recurring challenges and recommendations for future collaboration

While engagement is robust and developing rapidly as outlined, there are some continuing challenges.

Some are operational, ranging from the need to increase cooperation in maritime surveillance and patrolling to raise the level of engagement in current arrangements and increased collaboration to grow and strengthen military capabilities. Experts agree that Australia and India could do more with their 2020 logistics support agreement to facilitate the replenishment of warships and military aircraft at each other's bases. Bilateral naval visits, while important, 'have been too few to credibly claim that the logistics agreement is being

optimally utilised, and Australia and India must raise the level of their engagement, going beyond pre-planned exercises and sporadic deployments'.⁷⁹ The beginning of joint patrolling in 2022 is a good sign, with a combined Australia-India maritime surveillance initiative with a RAAF P-8A Poseidon aircraft deployed to India and the successful deployment of a P-8I aircraft to Darwin for coordinated maritime patrols in Northern Australia for the first time.⁸⁰

Given the shared strategic imperative to establish a sustainable

counterweight to China's growing power in the region, there is a need to address Australia and India's mismatched capacities and capabilities. India still relies heavily on foreign investments for its defence modernisation and despite long-term efforts towards domestic manufacturing, remains one of the largest importers of major arms globally, which as discussed affects its political risk calculations, for instance on Russia.⁸¹ Australia too, is considerably reliant on the US as the fourth-largest importer of arms, procuring largely from the US (73%).⁸² By comparison, 92% of China's defence procurement is sourced from domestic production.⁸³



↑ From left, Indian Navy Chief of Personnel Vice Admiral Krishna Swaminathan, Commander Australian Fleet Rear Admiral Chris Smith, Indian Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh and Indian Navy Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar in Visakhapatnam, India, for Exercise Milan.

Given this mismatch, there is a potential for collaboration between Australian and Indian defence manufacturers and researchers on 'in areas of mutual interest including cyber security, integrated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, marine warfare and armed unmanned aerial vehicles'.⁸⁴ Shipbuilding, ship repair and maintenance, and aircraft maintenance and repair are other potential areas of collaboration that are being explored.⁸⁵ WA's potential for shipbuilding and marine services could offer particular opportunities here.⁸⁶ Australia and India could also build the capacity of the regional Information Fusion and Operation Centres in Madagascar and Seychelles and share knowledge on the protection of underwater submarine cables to assuage Indian concerns in the Western Indian ocean.⁸⁷

Despite identifying a shared maritime geography, more substantive policy initiatives are needed to build collaboration in the Indian Ocean region. These could include Australia's cooperation with the Indian Coast Guard given the latter's increased focus on patrolling and maritime safety at sea.⁸⁸ Additionally, the joint maritime surveillance initiative could be extended to Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India and to Australia's Cocos Islands, acting simultaneously as a 'force multiplier' and improving maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean.⁸⁹ Additionally, Australia could, it is argued, 'introduce a variation of the successful Pacific Patrol Boat Program into the Indian Ocean' – a potential opportunity for India and Australia to cooperate more closely in the north-east Indian Ocean.⁹⁰ There are also recommendations for Australia and India to collaborate with France on joint maritime surveillance, further extending and capitalising on India's continued partnership with the French.⁹¹

In addition to operational issues, many of which remain under consideration, more substantive political challenges exist owing to the discrepancies in the 'shared interests' and 'shared values' argument that often animate discussions on Australia-India relations. Despite the understanding that an assertive China in the region translates to a common security threat, India has been cautious about openly aggravating China by actively participating in collective defence initiatives. This was arguably the reason for India's refusal to permit Australia to participate in the Malabar exercises prior to 2020.⁹² This ambivalence was also reflected in India's participation in the Talisman Sabre in August 2023. Despite the very prominent announcement made during Anthony Albanese's visit to India in March 2023 about India's participation in the exercise as a top-tier security partner, India participated merely as an observer. Analysts have argued that while India has assured Australia of participating in the next edition, this follows a familiar Indian pattern, that participation in exercises such as Talisman Sabre might irritate Beijing.⁹³ While analytical arguments on defence cooperation tend to focus on operational impediments, Indian calculations regarding involvement in collective defence arrangements are often owing to political risk calculations and the desire to manage its constraints.⁹⁴ This logic has been seen in its decisions with regard to Russia as well as its continued border concerns with China, that continue to colour the level of its policy engagements with partners such as Australia.

While 'shared interests' are easy to identify, the question of 'shared values' is more ambiguous. India and Australia, as noted in several high-profile interactions, are 'pluralist democracies' that are committed to the pursuit of the international rule

of law and a 'rules-based order'.⁹⁵ Yet there is little debate in Australia regarding democratic backsliding in India, despite increasing evidence of the spilling over of domestic Indian politics into Australia's increasingly active Indian diaspora.⁹⁶ Variations also exist in what a 'rules-based order' means for Australia and India and how this affects cooperation in the defence and security sectors. In addition to evidence of suspected Indian espionage in Australia and attempts to "steal secrets about sensitive defence projects and airport security", the dissonance in the understanding of values could have other ramifications.⁹⁷ As discussed in previous sections of this paper, India continues to resist great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and insists on a 'free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific'. Unlike Australia, India prefers multiple partnerships and not 'alliances of containment', reflected in its reluctance to overtly criticise China or to sanction Russian actions – understood in Australia as a clear violation of the rules-based order.⁹⁸ Further, at the global level, India has been proactively attempting to dismantle – or at the very least reshape – the existing order [read US-led order] by underscoring equity and UN reforms to decentralise power.⁹⁹ While these debates are complex and nuanced, they do indicate limits to Indian action and reflect differences with Australian understandings of the issue, likely to impact decision making on more complex regional defence and security cooperation.

Conclusion

By any measure, Australia and India are now positioned more comfortably with each other, visible in a multi-stakeholder engagement in political, economic, cultural and defence sectors.

The relationship has come a long way since the mischaracterised and reductive '3Cs'. For both Australia and India, the preference for diversified security partnerships amid an unstable geopolitical environment has increased the geopolitical value of increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

The narrative put in motion by this change in mindset and increasing geopolitical value has been propelled further by domestic actors in both countries, including the foreign and defence diplomatic community, think tanks and other domestic interlocutors. Collectively, they have promoted the positive narrative and provided avenues for collaboration while simultaneously providing traction to frameworks on which the

Australia-India partnership is based. This includes the emphasis on the Indo-Pacific as a shared strategic region and the significance of maritime and security cooperation.

There are, however, noticeable limits to the strategic convergence between Australia and India. These are visible in operational challenges but also in the political sphere, for instance in the differing positions on the Ukraine issue, or in India's continued reluctance to present itself as an active challenger to China or to participate in formal collective security arrangements. India is also principally in agreement with China on matters such as FONOPs in its region, which are led by the US. This gives credence to arguments that Australia-India relations tend to deepen in the

presence of a clear Chinese threat but that there is a 'ceiling to India's relations with Australia [and] ... India will commit to the absolute minimum necessary'.¹⁰⁰

Despite the challenges, for now, the Australia-India relationship is enduring, and the multi-stakeholder approach offers hope for long-term engagement. Policy initiatives are robust and supported actively by political leadership and civil society. India is positioned quite centrally within Australia's foreign and defence policy towards the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. For India, the strategic partnership with Australia fits well within its preferred model of multilateral partnerships – a trend that is likely to continue.



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