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Australia and India: Indo-Pacific Partners

BY DAVID BREWSTER

India's Defense Minister A.K. Antony's trip to Australia earlier this month was the first ever visit by an Indian defense minister to that country. This remarkable fact underscores the somewhat distant—if mostly cordial—relationship that has long existed between the two countries, the two largest maritime powers among Indian Ocean states.

Until relatively recently, India and Australia operated in largely separate strategic spheres. Nonaligned India was mostly preoccupied with its immediate security problems in South Asia, while Australia, a loyal ally of the United States, was traditionally focused on the Asia Pacific. But their spheres of strategic interest are now converging. The rise of India as an economic and military power is giving it the confidence to gradually take more responsibility for Indian Ocean security and take a greater interest in Pacific affairs. As Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh commented in May, India is positioned to become a “net provider of security” in its region and beyond.

Australia's foreign policy perspectives are also evolving. Australia's strategic gaze has traditionally been towards its north, to Southeast Asia and beyond, while the Indian Ocean has generally received scant attention in strategic discussion. For decades, Australia has essentially relied on *Pax Americana* for security in the Indian Ocean, contributing when necessary to US-led military coalitions, but at the same time making little effort to develop close security relationships in the region beyond its partners in Southeast Asia.

However, in its 2013 Defense White Paper, Australia has announced the expansion of its principal strategic focus from the “Asia Pacific” towards the “Indo-Pacific”, essentially the arc of maritime Asia that extends from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia. The White Paper noted “the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic arc” with which Australia must concern itself, with Southeast Asia lying at its center. With the rebalancing of US defense resources towards Asia, Australia has realized that it needs to take a more active security management role in the Indian Ocean, preferably in conjunction with partners such as India.

These evolving perspectives in both countries are bringing India and Australia into increased contact. There is also a greater recognition in both New Delhi and Canberra—at least in theory—of shared strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and East Asia. China is a factor, but there are also many other shared security interests. But putting theory into practice is likely to be difficult and slow. Although India and Australia concluded a Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation in 2006 and a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2009, a substantive security relationship has not developed as quickly as some had hoped. For one thing, New Delhi was irritated by Canberra's ban on uranium exports to countries that are not a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Uranium exports are a politically controversial issue in Australia,

David Brewster, Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defense Studies Center, Australian National University, explains that “The development of the India-Australia relationship is consistent with Washington's objectives for both countries to take a more active security role in the Indian Ocean and can also be seen as part of a slow tilt by India towards the US security sphere.”



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but in December 2011, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard faced down many in her own party to force a change in this policy, specifically for India.

This should have cleared away a roadblock for further development of the relationship. Yet many observers still see continuing inertia, and even bureaucratic opposition, from New Delhi in developing a security relationship with a middle-sized power such as Australia, a close ally of the United States. Some of India's other emerging partners in Asia, including Japan and Singapore, are also close to the United States. However, despite Australia's ethnic diversity, its Anglo-Saxon heritage may be a reason for pause by some in New Delhi. There are also important cultural differences to overcome, including trying to bridge the gap between Australia's activist and relatively open approach to security and India's extreme caution and defensiveness regarding its security engagements.

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Minister Antony's visit came soon after a visit by Prime Minister Singh to Tokyo where he argued that Japan was a "natural and indispensable partner" to India. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has called for a strategy in which India, Japan, the United States and Australia would form a "diamond" to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific. Whether or not New Delhi will come to agree with Abe's "diamond" strategy, it seems likely that the India-Australia relationship will indeed have growing importance for maritime security in the Indian Ocean, as well as other implications for security in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

During Antony's visit it was announced that bilateral exercises between the Australian and Indian navies would begin in 2015, a proposal that has been under discussion for some time. Although both navies are keen for greater engagement, they are also stretched by existing operational and exercise commitments. However, perhaps the most important part of the visit was the opportunity to build better personal relationships between Indian and Australian leaders, a gap that sorely needs more work and attention.

Both countries will also be looking for other ways to work together in the Indian Ocean and further afield, including more military staff talks and an expansion in exchanges and training. In addition, there is a commitment to work together to give greater substance to multilateral forums in the Indian Ocean such as the Indian Ocean Rim – Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). There have also been suggestions about possible trilateral dialogues between India, Australia and Indonesia, which would facilitate the discussion of security issues of common concern. These Indian Ocean-centered groupings may provide an important opportunity for India, Australia and other key countries such as Indonesia to jointly mold and manage their regional security environment in coming years.

The development of the India-Australia relationship is consistent with Washington's objectives for both countries to take a more active security role in the Indian Ocean and can also be seen as part of a slow tilt by India towards the US security sphere. However, New Delhi is highly cautious about taking any steps towards anything that even vaguely hints of an alliance. This includes Canberra's suggestion of a Trilateral Security Dialogue among India, Australia and the United States that would parallel the Trilateral Security Dialogue among India, Japan and the United States.

As a result of New Delhi's sensitivities, the initial focus for Australia-India cooperation will likely be on developing a bilateral partnership in the Indian Ocean without the overt involvement of the United States. This is not such a bad thing and there are certainly many opportunities for India and Australia to work together to help manage regional security. But building the relationship will be a slow process.

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