



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 288 | November 14, 2014

Modi's Canberra Visit: Continuing the Momentum

BY RAJESWARI PILLAI RAJAGOPALAN

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in Brisbane for the G20 Summit this month, and will then travel to Canberra for an official bilateral visit. Modi's visit, which will take place nearly thirty years after the last Indian Prime Ministerial visit (Rajiv Gandhi in 1986), comes at a critical time for both countries—strategic equations are being redrawn, creating new Asian security dynamics.

Much has happened in India-Australia relations since Prime Minister Gandhi's 1986 visit. Even though the relationship subsequently picked up, it hit a major road block following India's 1998 nuclear tests. Australia, along with the US and its other allies, imposed sanctions on India, which effectively poisoned the relationship for the next decade. However, the two sides have been able to pull bilateral relations together once again. In 2009, they elevated their relationship to one of a strategic partnership.

India and Australia are engaged today in a variety of areas. They have growing defense ties in the form of consultations and multilateral exercises, as well as a broader security and strategic relationship that covers nuclear non-proliferation and energy security, both in coal and civil nuclear, and is likely to expand to solar and wind. The congruence of interests and ideas is indeed growing. However, it is important that India-Australia relations are not entirely viewed through the bilateral prism. Instead, the relationship needs to be based on regional security considerations about which Canberra and New Delhi share similar views.

India-Australia relations have to nurture a stable multipolar regional order in the Asia Pacific and this common desire should be the driving force of the bilateral relationship. This could entail beefing up bilateral security relations particularly between the two navies and air force. Australia is the current chair of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an initiative that will enhance naval and maritime interactions between the two sides as well as with other regional powers.

Even as New Delhi and Canberra look to cooperate and shape a stable balance of power in Asia, which is undoubtedly important, the two have to look at the creation of wealth and prosperity to give weight to their strategic engagement. Economic stability and power is the basis of military power, even though economic power by itself is insufficient. There are significant compatibilities between Australia's emphasis on resource exports and India's need for resource imports. This is particularly the case given India's relatively poor resource situation and the growing needs of its economy. India is not yet a manufacturing power, but it desires to be one, and the two economies will become even more complementary as India travels down this path.

In an Asia that is characterized by economic cooperation and strategic rivalry, what are the other avenues that could be explored between the two? Given Australia's level of

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan,
Senior Fellow at the Observer
Research Foundation in New Delhi,
explains that “there is a new
outlook on bilateral relations, with
a growing bipartisan support
emerging in Australia for closer
ties with India and New Delhi
shedding its old thinking about
Canberra as an appendage to
Washington.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

“Today, there are several challenges including rise of Chinese military power, potential blockade of SLOCs, and piracy, among other developments, that are threatening the maritime order.”

innovation and experiences in the hi-tech sector, and given that India has its own areas of strength, hi-tech cooperation could emerge as an important aspect of the relationship. There are a few ongoing bilateral initiatives under the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF) and the Indo-Australia Biotechnology Fund (IABF) but science and technology (S&T) cooperation remains an underexplored domain. Cooperation in strategic research with direct relevance in strengthening innovation capacity and raising the level of intellectual capital in both countries should be pursued with greater vigor. Collaborative efforts with practical application of science and innovation could aid important sectors such as agriculture and water management.

One other area that has promise in the bilateral context is space. Potential for cooperation between India and Australia in this sector is immense. Since India is an established space power, with significant space launch capabilities, Australia could use India’s expertise in this regard. India’s space capabilities could directly impact one of the key areas of concern to both countries: maritime security in the Indian Ocean and South and East China seas. Given the heavy reliance on satellites for intelligence, communications, navigation and over-the-horizon targeting, this becomes an immediate area of focus between the Indian and Australian navies. Effective maritime operations and ensuring maritime order in the Asia Pacific region requires continuous and uninterrupted access to outer space and the data and services provided by satellites. India’s own navigation system, even though limited in coverage, coupled with the first dedicated military communications satellite for the Indian Navy, will go a long way in beefing up India’s maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities and maritime security options. This presents an ideal opportunity for cooperation between New Delhi and Canberra.

Australia’s geography makes it a vital Indian Ocean power, both from a regional security and a maritime point of view. The western coast of Australia meets the eastern boundary of the Indian Ocean and the fact that its submarine fleet is based near Perth in Western Australia boosts the import of Indian Ocean in Australia’s security calculus. That there are important sea lanes from the mining and energy ports of the north-west through the Indonesian archipelago (especially to China, Japan and Korea) changes the dynamics of the Indian Ocean. All of these indicate the need to have a stable and secure maritime domain. And today, there are several challenges including rise of Chinese military power, potential blockade of SLOCs, and piracy, among other developments, that are threatening the maritime order. If uninterrupted access to the trade and energy shipping corridors is to be maintained, it is essential to ensure continued access to space assets that will provide a constant watch over the region.

Beyond these specifics, what is most important is that there is a new outlook on bilateral relations, with a growing bipartisan support emerging in Australia for closer ties with India and New Delhi shedding its old thinking about Canberra as an appendage to Washington.

The fact that both the countries were able to conclude a nuclear deal during the recent visit of Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is an important indicator in this regard. Abbott’s successful visit must now be built upon by Prime Minister Modi during his upcoming visit to Canberra.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Alex Forster

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

Dr. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi. She served at the National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India from 2003 to 2007. She can be contacted at: rajeswarirajagopalan@gmail.com. This article is part of the America’s Asian Allies: Managing Competitive and Cooperative Pressures project being undertaken by ANU and the East-West Center, Washington, DC office, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.