

Policy Perspective

The India-Australia security engagement Opportunities and Challenges

Summary

India wants to take a leading strategic role throughout the Indian Ocean region and expand its strategic reach further into the Pacific. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has commented, India now sees itself as a “net security provider” to the region. But what will this mean in terms of India’s regional relationships? Over the last decade or more, India has spent a lot of money on modernising its defence forces. This includes buying aircraft carriers, submarines, and aircraft that will give India the ability to project power at longer distances. But India has given relatively less attention to developing closer security partnerships in the region, particularly with the middle states of the Indian Ocean. In many ways, the recognition of India as a regional leader will depend on the quality of these relationships.

One of these relationships – between India and Australia – will become increasingly important to both countries. Indeed, there is an opportunity for them to develop a strategic partnership that effectively spans the Indo-Pacific. The two countries are the leading maritime powers among Indian Ocean states, they share many values and traditions, and their strategic interests are becoming increasingly aligned.

Although the two countries have for long operated in largely separate strategic spheres, these are now converging. India has strategic interests throughout the Indo-Pacific and Australia is taking a much greater interest in the Indian Ocean region and in India, in particular. The shared strategic concerns include maritime security, the stability of the region, and the role of China. But while there are many opportunities to develop a close strategic partnership, there will also be challenges for both sides.

Dimensions

1. India as a regional leader: India aspires to strategic leadership of the Indian Ocean region and to be recognised as a “net security provider” to the region. India must not only develop its military capabilities, but also focus on developing closer security relationships with other key states in the region, particularly with middle powers such as Australia, Indonesia, and South Africa..

2. The changing strategic environment: Changes in the balance of power in Asia are bringing India’s and Australia’s interests closer together. The two countries share concerns about the implications of the rise of China and the stability of the region; both also have critical interests in ensuring the freedom of the seas along the whole Asian littoral. There are many opportunities for bilateral cooperation..

3. India's perspectives on Australia: In principle, India sees Australia as one of several important new strategic partners in the Indo Pacific. But India has a long-standing tradition of strategic autonomy, and some in New Delhi are still hesitant about developing the relationship with Australia.

4. Australia's perspectives on India: Australia hopes to develop a broad-based strategic partnership with India, which covers the economic, political, and security dimensions. But to develop a closer security relationship with India, Australia must move beyond its comfort zone and learn how to work with India in new and different ways.

The way forward

1. Give security dialogues more substance: India and Australia hold regular strategic dialogues at several levels, but the dialogues have to be given more substance. The discussions could also be

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extended to include other key partners such as Indonesia, Japan, and the United States.

2. Cooperate in international groupings:

Australia is now assuming the chair of the two groupings of Indian Ocean states – the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). India and Australia need to work together to further develop these groupings and make them more effective. The two countries should also cooperate in international initiatives to curtail the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

3. Conduct joint naval exercises and training:

The Indian and Australian navies will be key to a closer security relationship. Australia and India should hold bilateral naval exercises as soon as possible. The Indian Navy also has the opportunity to participate in multilateral exercises hosted by Australia, which involve Asia Pacific states. In the long term, both navies can work together in specialised areas such as amphibious capabilities and submarine training.

4. Focus on humanitarian and disaster relief:

Cooperation in working on regional disaster relief is an important way for India and Australia to help the region. It will also be an opportunity for

regular interaction between the navies of the two countries. India and Australia should develop a cooperative system with other concerned states for responding to natural disasters in the eastern Indian Ocean.

5. Work together on maritime border protection:

The protection of maritime borders against terrorist activities and other threats is a major shared concern. India and Australia could work together to further develop systems to identify maritime threats across the Indian Ocean. This could also be pursued in cooperation with key states such as Indonesia.

6. Build on shared interests in the Antarctic:

The opening of India's new Bharati Station in the Antarctic has created many opportunities for cooperation with Australia's presence in the Antarctic, in such areas as logistics and research. Cooperation in the Antarctic can become a concrete representation of shared interests in the broader Indian Ocean region.

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