

The Australia–India Framework for Security Cooperation: Another Step Towards an Indo-Pacific Security Partnership

David Brewster

Narendra Modi’s visit to Australia in November 2014 and his fanfare address to the Australian Parliament was accompanied by much discussion of a “natural partnership” between the two countries. The visit was a significant step forward in a relationship that could one day become an important part of Australia’s overall strategic posture. One of the most substantive achievements of the visit was the conclusion of a Framework for Security Cooperation setting out an Action Plan for a more comprehensive security and defence relationship. The Framework signals an intention on both sides to intensify the Australia-India security engagement and take it into some important new areas.

This comment gives an overview of recent developments in the Australia-India security and defence relationship. It then examines the terms of the Framework, focusing on new areas of cooperation set out in the Framework. The comment then considers how the relationship will likely develop in coming years.

Recent Developments in the Strategic Relationship

The changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific—and particularly the emergence of both China and India as major powers—is forcing India and Australia to engage on security and defence issues much more than ever before. The relationship has gone through many ups and downs since India’s Independence in 1947, often reflecting quite different ideological orientations and strategic perspectives—for several reasons neither country saw the other as a key strategic partner.¹ Australia has pursued the relationship with some enthusiasm over the last decade or so, but it is only recently that India has been prepared to engage on a more substantive level. The Modi Government is now showing much greater enthusiasm for building a substantive security and defence partnership with Australia.

Developments in the Australia-India strategic relationship are part of a multi-decade evolution of India’s relations with several Asia-Pacific powers. Since

¹ See David Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 119-33.

the 1990s, as part of its “Look East” policy (now re-badged its “Act East” policy), India has given considerable economic, political and strategic focus to East Asia. This has included developing improved security relationships with key partners such as Vietnam and Singapore.² India’s relationship with the United States has also steadily improved over the last decade or so, particularly after Washington granted India *de facto* recognition as a nuclear weapons state, which opened the way for a significant expansion of military and security engagements. India’s security relationship with Japan is also on the upswing, particularly since 2007, with the two countries increasingly seeing each other as poles in an emerging axis focused on balancing against China.

India’s relationship with Australia has followed a similar trajectory. In 2009, India and Australia declared that they were “strategic partners”, signalling an intention to develop a closer and more comprehensive relationship. There has been significant growth in trade over the last decade and in 2012-13, bilateral merchandise and services trade stood at A\$16.6 billion—although the value of exports to India had dropped over the past couple of years due to the fall in commodity prices. A Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) has been under negotiation for some time that has the potential to yield huge gains to both the Australian and Indian economies.³ It was agreed during Modi’s visit in November 2014 to accelerate negotiations on the CECA, and in early 2015 there were ambitious claims that negotiations may be finalised this year.⁴ However, based on India’s other concluded free trade agreements (FTA) and its progress on negotiations of many others, it seems unlikely that India would be willing to open up key markets (say in agriculture) to Australian products although greater progress may be made in investment and services. The CECA is therefore unlikely to produce economic benefits to Australia in the nature or scale of those provided by its recent FTA with China. Overall, an Australia-India CECA, if and when concluded, may be an important step forward in the relationship, but it may have more political significance than immediate economic substance.

Australia has paid considerable attention to improving the defence and security relationship with India over the last decade, with a focus on creating opportunities for engagement among political leaders, and civil and military officials. Regular security or defence engagements now include annual meetings of Foreign Ministers, regular meetings of Defence Ministers, annual Defence Policy Talks, an Australia-India Maritime Security Operations Working Group, regular staff talks between senior officers of each of the

² See generally, Danielle Rajaratnam, ‘India’s new Asia-Pacific strategy: “Act East”’, *Lowy Interpreter*, 18 December 2014, < <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/12/18/Indias-new-Asia-Pacific-strategy-Act-East.aspx?COLLCC=3624601532&>> [Accessed 25 February 2015].

³ Australia-India Joint Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Feasibility Study, available at <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/fta/aifta/Australia-India-Joint-FTA-Feasibility-Study.html>>

⁴ Nayanima Basu, ‘India, Australia CECA Talks Hit Farm Hurdle’, *Business Standard*, 17 January 2015.

armed services and several 1.5 track roundtables. Over the last decade or so there has also been a series of bilateral agreements on terrorism, defence cooperation, information sharing and extradition, and a 2009 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, which was a non-binding declaration intended to create a framework for the further security cooperation.⁵ In recent years there has also been much greater cooperation in regional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which are potentially important (if limited) forums for dialogue on security related issues in the Indian Ocean region.

Much of the impetus for bilateral engagement has so far come from Canberra. Although this has not been wholly unrequited, Delhi's response has been constrained by several factors. These include political irritations (attacks on Indian students; the uranium issue), ideological constraints (a continuing emotional attachment among some in Delhi to the ideal of nonalignment and associated suspicions of America and US allies) and bureaucratic inertia (Indian bureaucrats are world famous for their predilection for saying no).⁶ As a result, the security and defence relationship has developed largely at the political or rhetorical level and practical or operational engagement between the respective armed forces and other government agencies has been limited. For example, although India's agreement to hold bilateral naval exercises with Australia from 2015 is a welcome development, it must be measured against the fact that the Indian Navy already conducts regular bilateral exercises (or similar operations) with at least eight other navies.

The 2014 Framework reflects a relatively recent sea change in Delhi's view of Australia as an important regional partner. The visit of Tony Abbott to Delhi in September 2014 effectively cleared away uranium as an issue that had considerable symbolic importance to India.⁷ The election of the Modi Government in May 2014 has also reduced Delhi's residual attachment to non-alignment that inhibited India's ability to fully engage with countries such as Australia. Modi has demonstrated a much greater confidence than the previous Indian government in operationalising India's new defence and security relationships throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Australia-India Security Declaration, see David Brewster, 'The Australia-India Security Declaration: The Quadrilateral Redux?' *Security Challenges*, vol. 6, no.1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 1-9.

⁶ These constraints are explored in detail in David Brewster, 'The India-Australia Security and Defence Relationship: Developments, Constraints and Prospects', *Security Challenges*, vol. 10, no.1 (2014), pp. 65-86.

⁷ Although there are considerable hesitations among informed observers over the terms of the draft agreement. See John Carlson, 'Is the Abbott Government Abandoning Australia's Nuclear Safeguards Standards for India?' *Lowy Interpreter*, 1 October 2014.

A Look at the 2014 Australia-India Framework

The Framework consists of an Action Plan for cooperation in the following areas:

- annual summit and foreign policy exchanges and coordination;
- defence policy planning and coordination;
- counter-terrorism and other transnational crimes;
- border protection, coast guard and customs;
- disarmament, non-proliferation, civil nuclear energy and maritime security;
- disaster management and peacekeeping; and
- cooperation in regional and multilateral fora.

Consistent with previous agreements, the Action Plan lists existing bilateral engagements and mechanisms for cooperation. This now includes a commitment to annual meetings of Prime Ministers (although not necessarily annual visits). It also lists the multilateral forums where Australia and India can work together, including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the United Nations and the G20. Importantly, the Action Plan covers new areas of defence and security cooperation not covered in detail or at all in the 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. These new or enhanced areas are discussed in greater detail below:

COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION

The Action Plan gives considerable focus to cooperation in counter-terrorism, and identifies the following engagements or areas of cooperation:

- annual Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and other Transnational Crimes;
- cooperation in counter-terrorism training and exchanges between experts on countering improvised explosive devices, bomb incidents and technologies;
- exchanges on counter-radicalisation;
- cooperation between police on investigation of transnational crime;
- cooperation on extradition and mutual legal assistance requests;

- cooperation between AUSTRAC and Financial Intelligence Unit-India;
- exchanges on cyber policy and cooperation between CERT India and CERT Australia; and
- cooperation on combating illegal migration.

A greater public focus on counter-terrorism may in part reflect the rise of ISIS and concerns about Australian and Indian nationals participating in the Syria/Iraq civil wars. Ways of responding to Islamic radicalisation could well be an area that Australia could learn from India.⁸ Both sides are also in the process of establishing cyber security organisations: the Australian Cyber Security Centre was opened in December 2014, while India is establishing a separate armed forces Cyber Command, probably led by the Indian Navy.

COOPERATION IN DEFENCE TECHNOLOGY

A completely new area addressed by the Action Plan is cooperation in defence research and development, including through visits by Australian and Indian defence material delegations and efforts to foster joint industry links. Although this has previously been given a low profile in the relationship, some see defence technology as a potential important area of cooperation. Defence technology certainly has been an important plank in India's relationships with the Soviet Union/Russia, France, Israel, and the United States and increasingly also other regional partners. Delhi is currently negotiating the US\$1.65 billion acquisition of US-2 amphibious aircraft from Japan as part of an enhanced strategic partnership with Tokyo. Delhi has also recently requested that Japan consider offering its *Soryu* class submarines as part of India's new submarine project.⁹ Access to defence technology is certainly something that gets Delhi's attention.

Australia has strengths in several areas that are of interest to India. These include radar technologies and technologies with undersea applications and naval shipbuilding. But there are reasons for caution in trying to use Australian defence exports to enhance the relationship. The most significant is the parlous state of India's defence procurement system, which despite some reforms under the Modi Government, remains Byzantine, dysfunctional and riddled with corruption. This creates significant risks for Australian defence suppliers hoping to do business in India. In theory, there is considerable scope for direct cooperation between the government defence research

⁸ Despite India having a population of some 140 million Muslims, Indian security sources claim that perhaps 10-20 Indian nationals have joined ISIS and related groups, compared with some estimates of more than 100 Australian nationals.

⁹ Rahul Bedi, 'India Asks Japan to Offer *Soryu* Subs for Project 75I requirement', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 29 January 2015. Some Indian commentators have raised the possibility of trilateral arrangements to build *Soryu* submarines, including Australia.

organisations, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Australia's Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO), but again there are also some significant complications, not least being the DRDO's role as both an R&D organisation and a manufacturer. Given the high level of dysfunction and delays commonly associated with Indian defence research, development and production, Australia may be very cautious in developing this aspect of the relationship.

Some also may question the overall wisdom of using defence technology cooperation as a means of developing a closer security relationship. India has resisted attempts by defence technology partners such as the former Soviet Union and currently the United States to leverage defence sales into a broader defence relationship. The Indian military tends to see defence technology procurement as quite separate from a broader defence relationship and is resistant to allowing equipment acquisitions to be used as a reason for operational cooperation. A defence procurement relationship with India, even by major powers, can be a cause of considerable irritations in the bilateral relationship.

COOPERATION IN BORDER PROTECTION

The Action Plan also provides commitments to cooperation in border protection, coast guard, and customs. This is likely to be an increasingly important area of interaction. The need for greater cooperation in border protection issues was brought to the fore in July 2014, when two boatloads of ethnic Tamil asylum seekers were intercepted by Australian authorities in international waters. Unlike previous cases, these boats had departed India rather than Sri Lanka and it was not clear whether the passengers were of Sri Lankan or Indian nationality. Australian authorities forcibly returned the first boat to Sri Lanka. After prolonged negotiations with Delhi, Canberra grudgingly agreed to bring the second boatload of 157 asylum-seekers to mainland Australia to facilitate access by Indian consular officials. The Australian Government was then forced to back off attempts to return the second boatload of asylum seekers to India after Delhi indicated that it would not be a party to forced repatriations.

While both sides were able to avoid this incident creating irritations in the broader relationship, it clearly pointed to a need for enhanced cooperation between Australian and Indian authorities in responding to unregulated population movements. In coming years we are also likely to see much greater use of coast guard authorities to enforce maritime security and maritime claims throughout the Indo-Pacific region. China, for example, regularly uses coast guard or quasi-civilian vessels in demonstrations of its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The potential for practical cooperation between Australian and Indian border protection authorities was underlined by the visit of an Indian Coast Guard vessel to Darwin in December 2014, the first such visit of the Indian Coast Guard to Australian waters. Australia, with the support of Japan and India, is also seeking membership of

the Heads of Asian Coast Guards Agency (HACGA) meeting (the coast guard equivalent to the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS)). The HACGA is likely to become a much more prominent forum for regional interaction on maritime security issues.

CO-OPERATION IN EXPORT CONTROL REGIMES

Another area of emphasis in the Framework Agreement is on disarmament and non-proliferation. The agreement includes commitments to hold an annual bilateral dialogue on Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and International Security and, importantly, includes a pledge by Australia to support Indian membership of various international export control regimes.

The most well known of these regimes is the Nuclear Suppliers Group (a grouping of some forty-seven states that supply nuclear materials and technology).¹⁰ Other export control groupings include the Australia Group (a grouping of some forty-one states and international organisations that collaborate to prevent the abuse of dual-use technology and materials for chemical and biological weapons programs), the Missile Technology Control Regime (a grouping of thirty-four states to prevent the proliferation of missile technologies with a range above 400 kilometres) and the Wassenaar Arrangement (an arrangement among forty-one states aimed at non-proliferation of conventional arms and dual use goods). These regimes had their genesis in Cold War era attempts to restrict Soviet access to weapons-related technology. Although the former Cold War foes, Russia and China, are full members of several of these groupings,¹¹ India is a member of none of them. This reflects India's stance against the "unfairness" of the international nuclear non-proliferation treaty which prohibited any states other than Permanent 5 from owning nuclear weapons, and Delhi's traditional deep suspicions of international regimes that restrict the transfer of technology.

Although Delhi is now coming to understand the value of these regimes in maintaining international security it now finds itself on the outer. Australia, as an active participant in several of these groupings can play an important role in helping to negotiate India's membership, which would require a consensus among existing members. Australia is already lobbying members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group to grant India entry as a full member, even though it is outside the nuclear non-proliferation regime. As chair of the Australia Group, Australia can also play an important role in facilitating India's entry into that grouping. The Australia Group may be a logical place to begin India's formal entry into the global export control network, because it is not connected to any residual sensitivities about nuclear issues. Given India's massive

¹⁰ Which was actually established in response to India's first nuclear weapons test in 1974.

¹¹ China is a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and voluntarily abides by the Missile Technology Control Regime. Russia is a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Missile Technology Control Regime.

chemical industry and the growing biotechnology sector, the absence of India from the export control regime is unsustainable.¹²

SEARCH AND RESCUE

The Action Plan also commits to greater cooperation between Australian and Indian agencies with responsibilities for international search and rescue (SAR), including through information exchange and regional dialogue. The strategic significance of international search and rescue operations came to public attention in early 2014, when Australia took a leading role in the search for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in the Indian Ocean. Australia's commitment of significant resources to the search effort was a powerful statement of its role in the region. Delhi (for apparently obscure bureaucratic reasons) chose not to participate in the multilateral search being conducted out of Perth, unlike China, which contributed considerable air and maritime assets. Indian commentators such as Raja Mohan saw this as a mistake.¹³ A decade ago, Delhi recognised the geopolitical significance of Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The inclusion of SAR in the Action Plan may indicate that Delhi now better understands the political significance of SAR.

COOPERATION IN HADR AND PEACEKEEPING

The Action Plan also includes commitments for greater cooperation in HADR, collaboration in the East Asia Summit on disaster management; and cooperation and exchanges on peacekeeping issues, including between peacekeeping institutions. Disaster management and peacekeeping are low-hanging fruit—while they sit at the “soft” end of the spectrum of security cooperation, they can be very useful ways to develop personal relationships and inter-operability and provide an opportunity to generate significant goodwill.¹⁴

India's work with Australia, the United States and Japan in the multilateral naval response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is often seen as a turning point in Delhi's understanding of the benefits of cooperation with other maritime democracies in the Asia Pacific. The response contributed directly to much improved relationships between the Indian Navy and the navies of Japan and Australia and the United States. The episode was an important lesson in the potentially broader strategic consequences of cooperation in HADR.

¹² Lisa Curtis, Walter Lohman, Rory Medcalf, Lydia Powell, Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan and Andrew Shearer, *Shared Goals, Converging Interests: A Plan for U.S.–Australia–India Cooperation in the Indo–Pacific*, The Heritage Foundation, Lowy Institute and Observer Research Foundation, 3 November 2011, <<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/11/shared-goals-converging-interests-a-plan-for-u-s-australia-india-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific>> [Accessed 25 February 2015].

¹³ C. Raja Mohan, 'Chinese Takeaway: PLA Goes Out', *Indian Express*, 26 March 2014.

¹⁴ Brewster, 'The India-Australia Security and Defence Relationship'.

There is much room for India and Australia and other Indian Ocean states to work together in HADR. For example, India and Australia could work together to develop a system for responding to natural disasters in the Indian Ocean region similar to the FRANZ trilateral cooperation arrangement in the South Pacific which helps Australia, France, and New Zealand and others to coordinate their relief operations after cyclones and other natural disasters.¹⁵ Australia is increasingly focussing on cooperation with Indian Ocean partners such as Indonesia in disaster relief and India could well become another partner in that cooperation. The acquisition by the Australian Navy of the two huge Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) ships, HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Adelaide*, means that Australia's contributions to regional disaster relief are only likely to increase in coming years.

Peacekeeping operations can also provide a useful locus for cooperation, particularly between the respective armies. In addition to building institutional relationships, cooperation in peacekeeping training would demonstrate India's and Australia's shared commitment to the UN and international stability. Both countries have long been contributors to peacekeeping: since the end of World War II, India has contributed more than 100,000 personnel to some forty UN peacekeeping operations with more than 100,000 personnel, while Australia has contributed more than 30,000 personnel to some 100 peace operations. India operates the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping in New Delhi, which also provides the Secretariat of the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres. Australia and India have previously exchanged students and instructors to their peacekeeping training centres on an *ad hoc* basis but more focused cooperation in peacekeeping training is possible and the potential for bilateral peacekeeping exercises can also be explored.

What is the Significance of the Framework?

The Framework for Security Cooperation is a significant development in several ways. It represents an intention to intensify the engagements that have been developing over the last decade or so. Importantly, it also signifies an intention to broaden the defence and security relationship to new areas and enhance cooperation in existing areas. It may also indicate a desire by the Modi Government to move past some of India's previous inhibitions in the defence relationship with Australia. How effectively that is communicated to the powerful Indian bureaucracy, particularly the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, remains to be seen. The implications for Australia of the appointment of Manohar Parrikar as Indian Defence Minister in November 2014 are not yet clear, although at least India now has a full time Defence Minister who may be able to drive institutional change. The recent

¹⁵ Future Directions International, 'Strategic Objectives of the United States in the Indian Ocean Region', Workshop Report, 29 September 2011, <www.futuredirections.org.au/publications/workshop-papers/248-strategic-objectives-of-the-united-states-in-the-indian-ocean-region.html> [Accessed 24 February 2015].

appointment of S. Jaishankar as Indian Foreign Secretary may also indicate a wish by the Modi Government to put a more realist stamp on foreign policy. In any event, there has definitely been a palpable change over the last couple of years in the tone of India-Australia defence relations. The Framework may therefore represent an important step in the difficult task of moving the Australia-India partnership past rhetoric to the operational level. If the engagement continues, the relationship could become an important pillar in Australia's strategic posture, and indeed potentially a pillar of regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

The Framework should also be seen as another step in India's expanding network of security relationships in the region. The Modi Government does not appear to be averse to developing minilateral security arrangements with large and small powers. India is currently exploring maritime security arrangements with various smaller Indian Ocean states, including with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles and has expressed a desire to develop multilateral arrangements in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁶ The status of existing trilateral security dialogue among India, Japan and the United States, which is currently held at additional secretary level, may be upgraded. At the time of writing, a new trilateral security dialogue among India, Japan and Australia may also be on the cards, which would have considerable symbolic importance, but also perhaps practical consequences for cooperation in maritime security and defence technology. A renewed quadrilateral dialogue including the United States may not be out of the question.

Another interesting factor is the interplay between Australia's growing partnership with India and Australia's relationship with China. The India-Australia Framework was announced on 18 November 2014, the day after the announcement of the finalisation of the terms of a comprehensive trade agreement between China and Australia. The China trade agreement is the first such agreement between China and a major developed country, and is widely viewed to be on favourable terms to Australia. Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed the Australian Parliament the day before Mr Modi made an address, urging Australia to embrace a 'harmonious' partnership with Beijing. China's response to the growing Australia-India defence partnership seems to be an even closer economic embrace of Australia, an approach that contrasts sharply with the hostile rhetoric that emanated from Beijing in 2007 after the announcement of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Perhaps Beijing has decided that economic interests of its Indo-Pacific partners will ultimately trump security alignments.

David Brewster is a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. dhbrewster@bigpond.com.

¹⁶ Sandeep Dikshit, 'Seychelles, Mauritius Join Indian Ocean Maritime Security Group', *The Hindu*, 7 March 2014.