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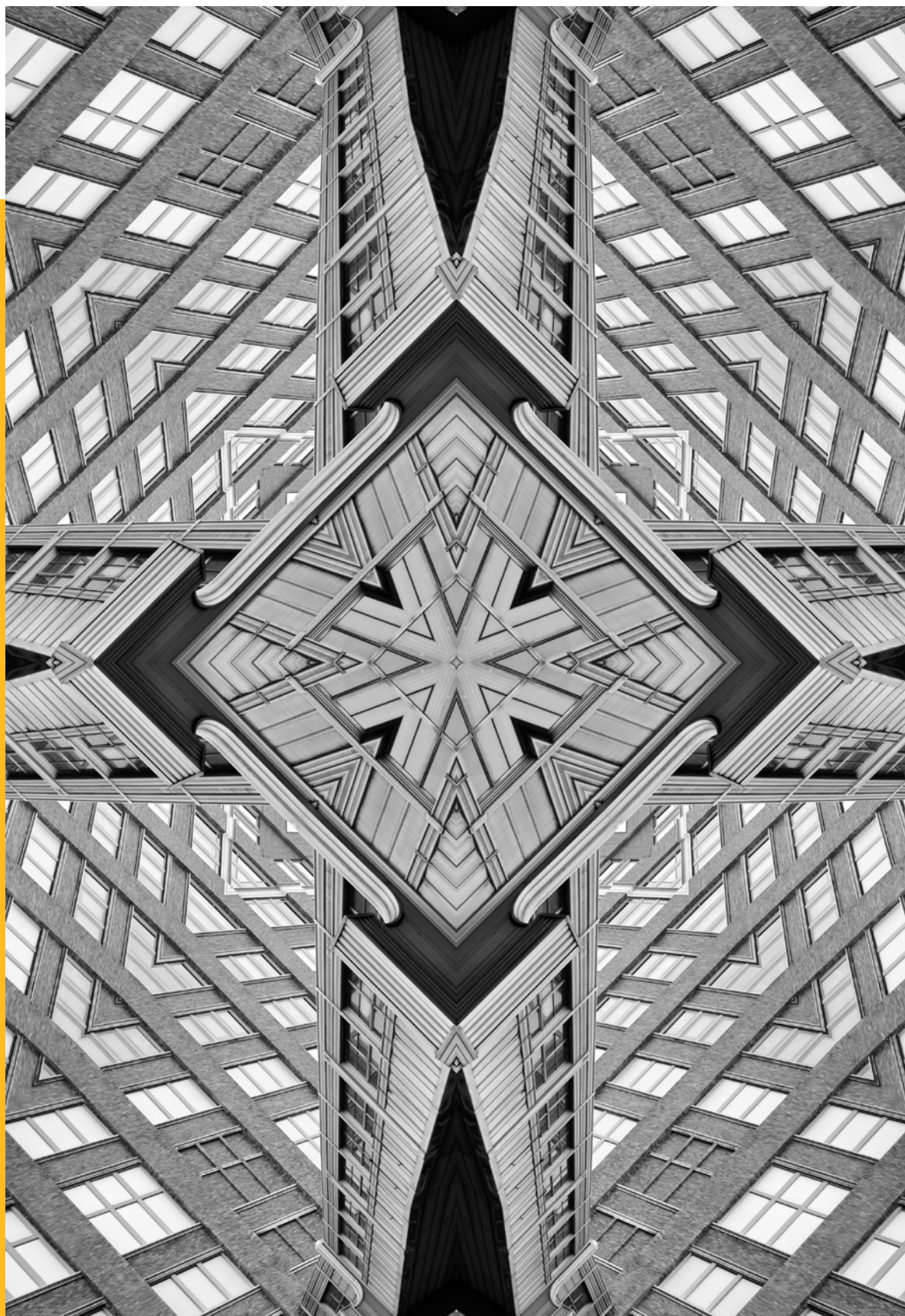
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Securing Two Oceans: Bolstering India-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Premesha Saha and Angad Singh

Abstract

Countries such as India and Australia are redefining their Indo-Pacific policies amidst the growing belligerence of China in the region. The two have a common interest in stability, while standing firmly against any militarisation. Their willingness to partner closely with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific lays the foundation for stronger defence and security cooperation between the two middle-power democracies and Indian Ocean littorals. This paper offers policy proposals and explores opportunities for stronger defence cooperation between India and Australia. Engagement between the two countries can include increasing bilateral and minilateral dialogues and consultation mechanisms; improving interoperability in the maritime, air, ground, and cyber domains; and deepening defence cooperation and technology collaboration.

The aim of ensuring a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ is dominating the foreign-policy agendas of many countries, including the United States (US), Japan, Australia, and India. Concerns are heightening amidst Chinese actions: extensive military modernisation; growing assertiveness in pursuing maritime territorial claims and controlling international or disputed waters; deployment of military assets on artificial islands in the South China Sea; use of coercive diplomatic and economic measures to suppress international criticism; and expansion of global presence.¹

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific region provides numerous opportunities for stakeholders to strengthen cooperation. These opportunities lie in various domains such as economic, defence and security, cyberspace, and technology.

Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Japan, and India are engaging in a balancing act in the current setting—i.e., maintaining their allegiance and partnerships with the US, while strengthening their bilateral ties with one another. The Indo-Pacific construct is also gaining acceptance among countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the past decade, many Indo-Pacific countries have increased their defence spending in response to the changing security environment. Many of these nations are also seeking to strengthen existing strategic relationships and to develop new ones. The US, Japan, Australia, and India are among the most active in this regard.² The Quad, and the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) security partnership both demonstrate this point.

“The Indo-Pacific provides opportunities for stakeholders to strengthen cooperation in domains such as economic, defence and security, cyberspace, and technology.”

India and Australia's Evolving Priorities in the Indo-Pacific

This section outlines the respective Indo-Pacific visions and strategies of India and Australia. Their strategies, in turn, are leading them to bolster their security capacities through enhanced defence acquisitions and spending, as well as strengthening existing defence cooperation.

The Indo-Pacific construct has gained currency in the foreign policy formulation of both countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has articulated a vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. India has engaged Russia, Japan, Australia, and other Indo-Pacific countries in light of the growing uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the evolving potential of minilateral and bilateral frameworks.³

For Australia, the country's geography and its broader interests are at the core of its Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴ Situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it is increasingly viewing itself as deeply embedded in the Indo-Pacific region. It is responding to increasing geopolitical uncertainty in the region by maintaining a strong alliance with the US, increasing defence spending, purchasing key combat systems from various suppliers, and nurturing strategic partnerships with Japan, India, and other countries. Australia has also announced its 2020 Defence Strategic Update—an AU\$270 billion (US\$190 billion) 10-year defence plan which Prime Minister Scott Morrison calls a “significant pivot.” This was the first time Australia included land, sea, and air-based long-range and hypersonic strike missiles in its defence plan. This, amidst regional tensions over territorial claims and unprecedented military modernisation.⁵

To be sure, there are differences in how the two nations regard the “Indo” half of the construct. Australia specifically identifies the north-eastern quadrant of the ocean as its priority area of interest; India's primary strategic theatre, meanwhile, is the entirety of the ocean, including its western reaches.

While Australia's interest in the Southwest Pacific (SWP) is well understood, the region is also growing in India's strategic calculations. Consequently, Australia will be an essential partner for India in the SWP, as the former is the predominant power in the region. Similarly, Australia will need to engage more deeply with India for the Northeast Indian Ocean to have a sustainable Australian presence. Given these realities, it is only expected that Australia and India step up their strategic cooperation through enhanced bilateral engagement.

Enhancing Strategic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Ties between India and Australia have deepened in recent years (see Table 1). The positive growth in bilateral ties, however, requires more push and buy-in from policymakers in both New Delhi and Canberra. Until recently, the relationship between India and Australia was relatively lukewarm. Each had their bilateral ties with major powers, which seemed sufficient. Recent geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific have also given rise to a growing mutual realisation that they must diversify their relationships. Yet, their geostrategic and geopolitical projections coincide with one another, given Australia's focus on the Indian Ocean. There is an overlap in the Indo-Pacific regional visions of the two countries.

Australia's efforts to develop broader security cooperation relationships is visible in the AUSINDEX exercise between Australia and India, the Indo-Pacific Endeavour naval deployment (which visited India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam), as well as the inclusion of Japan in the US-Australia Talisman Sabre exercise, for the first time, in 2019. Increasing high-level visits and joint military exercises between Australia and India highlight common concerns about the Indo-Pacific strategic order.⁶

Indeed, India has been strengthening ties with its partners in the Indo-Pacific region. This was seen when India signed the Shared Vision Statement of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific during PM Modi's first visit to Indonesia in May 2018.⁷ The first bilateral naval exercise between India and Indonesia—named *Samudra Shakti*—was conducted in 2018, and the first India-Singapore-Thailand naval exercise took place in September 2019. The Indian Navy has also conducted maiden bilateral exercises with Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. India and Japan also concluded the much-anticipated Mutual Logistics Pact for their Navies.⁸ India has reached out to a number of countries, including Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, to fast-track PM Modi's "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative", which is an open global initiative that draws on existing regional cooperation architectures and mechanisms to focus on seven pillars around maritime security: maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity-building and resource-sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity and maritime transport.⁹

India and Australia have also signed a Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, as India is ready to embark on a more proactive role in ensuring maritime security in the region. It was signed during the first virtual summit between Prime Ministers Modi and Morrison in June 2020.¹⁰ Australia participated in the 2020 Malabar exercises alongside Japan, the US, and India.

Enhancing Strategic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

India's Ministry of External Affairs has created the 'Oceania division', which is expected to focus on Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Island countries.¹¹ Australia will likely be the primary focus of this division. Australia is also keen to work and partner with India in its Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative. Therefore, the time is opportune for stronger cooperation and alignment between India and Australia to boost regional stability and provide strategic benefits for both nations.

Beyond their bilateral relationship, India and Australia are also intensifying their engagement in a growing number of minilateral and plurilateral platforms. These include the Quad, the India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral, and the Japan-Australia-India trilateral.

Both countries therefore appear keen in supporting and shaping the increasingly multipolar Indo-Pacific order. With the US-China geostrategic competition escalating, it is upon the rising and middle powers of the region to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

Table 1
High-Level Meetings and Their Outcomes

| High-Level Meetings | Agreements and Outcomes |
|--|--|
| March 2006. John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, visits India. | Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Customs Cooperation, a Trade and Economic Framework, MoU on Defence Cooperation, MoU on Cooperation in Biotechnology, and a Letter of Intent on the India-Australia Strategic Research Fund |
| September 2008. Stephen Smith, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia, visits India on. | Visit underlines the desire of both sides to raise the level of bilateral relations to a significantly higher level. |
| November 2009. Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, visits India. | The two countries agreed to a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. |
| January 2011. S.M. Krishna, Minister of External Affairs of India, visits Australia. | Talks on nuclear energy, uranium, mutual strategic interests, and Defence Policy dialogue |

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| October 2012. Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia visits India. | Discussions on maritime security, Indian Ocean Rim Association, defence ties, annual bilateral non-proliferation and disarmament |
| January 2013. Bob Carr, Foreign Minister of Australia, visits India. | Discussions on terrorism, cyber policy, maritime security, regional security, and civil nuclear cooperation |
| October 2013. Salman Khurshid, Minister of External Affairs of India, visits Australia. | Discussions on maritime security and IORA |
| September 2014. Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia, visits India. | Agreements on civil nuclear cooperation |
| November 2014. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, visits Australia. | Decided to establish a Framework for Security Cooperation. The focus would be on enhancing cooperation in foreign and defence policies, counter terrorism, border protection, Nuclear energy, maritime security. |
| April 2015. Julie Bishop, Foreign Minister of Australia, visits India to meet Manohar Parikar, Minister of Defence. | |
| April 2017. Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister of Australia, visits India. | MoU on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime and MoU for Promotion and Development of Cooperation in Civil Aviation Security. Reassurance that both countries remain strongly committed to the breadth of their defence ties, including through ongoing annual staff talks for Army, Navy and Air Forces. |
| July 2017. Julie Bishop, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia, visits India to meet with Shri Arun Jaitley, Minister of Defence and Finance of India. | |
| December 2017. Inaugural meeting of the 2+2 Dialogue between Defence and Foreign Secretaries of Australia and India. Held in India. | |
| October 2018. Second India-Australia Foreign and Defence Secretaries' 2+2 Dialogue held in Australia. | |

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| November 2018. President of India visits Australia. | No discussions on defence and security. |
| January 2019. Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia visits India to participate in Raisina Dialogue. Meets with Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, Minister of Defence. | |
| June 2019. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, and Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia, meet at the sidelines of G20 summit. | |
| December 2019. Third edition of India-Australia Foreign and Defence Secretaries' Dialogue (2+2) in New Delhi. | |
| January 2020. Marise Payne, Foreign Minister of Australia, visits India for Raisina Dialogue. | Both sides agreed to prioritise the building of a strong multi-faceted trade and economic cooperation as well as cooperation in Defence and Security. |
| June 2020. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, and Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia, hold virtual summit. | Agreements signed on processing of Critical and Strategic minerals, and Cyber and Cyber-Enabled Critical Technology Cooperation. Arrangement concerning cooperation in Defence Science and Technology to the MoU on Defence Cooperation put in place. Speech stressed on regular dialogues involving Ministers responsible for foreign, defence and trade policy, and a broad range of senior officials meetings, such as the Defence Policy Talks, Australia-India Maritime Dialogue and Navy to Navy Staff Talks. Upgraded 2+2 meetings to ministerial level and will be held every two years. |
| October 2020. Marise Payne, Foreign Minister of Australia, meets Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, meet each other on the sidelines of the Quad foreign ministers' meeting. | |

Source: Authors' own, using various sources.

Security Cooperation: Shaky Start, But Progressing

In recent years, rapid progress in India-Australia defence ties was facilitated by an assertive government in New Delhi and several key bilateral breakthroughs, including an agreement on uranium supplies from Australia.¹² In November 2014, only months into PM Modi's first term, the two countries signed a bilateral framework for security cooperation.¹³ In interviews, senior Indian military officials noted that although Australian cooperation commenced slowly, it has outpaced all other bilateral relationships in the past five years.

Naval exercises since the first AUSINDEX in 2015 have grown in scale and scope, as has cooperation between the armies and air forces (see Table 2). Exercise AUSTRALIND commenced in 2016, and the Indian Air Force (IAF) participated as an observer in exercise PITCH BLACK in the same year. Various multilateral exercises in India, Australia, and third countries, also ensured that the two militaries were increasingly engaged beyond the staff-level talks underway since Quad 1.0.

Table 2
Key India-Australia Military Exercises

| Exercise | Details |
|----------------------------------|---|
| MILAN, 2006 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| MALABAR, 2007 | Two-part multilateral naval exercise. Hosted by Japan and India. |
| MILAN, 2008 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| PASSEX, 2009 | Bilateral basic naval manoeuvres at sea |
| MILAN, 2010 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| KAKADU, 2010 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by Australia, Indian Navy present only as observer |
| MILAN, 2012 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| MILAN, 2014 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| PASSEX, 2015 | Bilateral basic naval manoeuvres at sea |
| AUSINDEX, 2015 | Bilateral naval exercise, hosted by India |
| International Fleet Review, 2016 | Multinational fleet review and basic exercise hosted by India |

Security Cooperation: Shaky Start, But Progressing

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| PITCH BLACK, 2016 | Multilateral air force exercise hosted by Australia, India present only as observer |
| KAKDU, 2016 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by Australia |
| AUSTRAHIND, 2016 | Bilateral army exercise hosted by India |
| AUSINDEX, 2017 | Bilateral naval exercise, hosted by Australia |
| AUSTRAHIND, 2017 | Bilateral army special forces exercise hosted by Australia |
| MILAN, 2018 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by India |
| PITCH BLACK, 2018 | Multilateral air force exercise hosted by Australia |
| AUSTRAHIND, 2018 | Bilateral army exercise hosted by India |
| KAKDU, 2018 | Multilateral naval exercise hosted by Australia |
| BLACK CARILLON, 2018 | Multilateral submarine rescue exercise hosted by Australia |
| AUSINDEX, 2019 | Bilateral naval exercise, hosted by India, as part of Australia's largest naval deployment, Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2019 (IPE-19) |
| BLACK CARILLON, 2019 | Multilateral submarine rescue exercise hosted by Australia |
| PASSEX, 2020 | Bilateral basic naval manoeuvres at sea |
| MALABAR, 2020 | Two-part multilateral naval exercise, hosted by India |

Source: Authors' own, using various sources

New Delhi's growing recognition of the necessity of burden-sharing in the Indo-Pacific has pushed it to engage in constructive and tangible terms with its security partners. This has led to the negotiation of various agreements on logistics, communications, and other related matters, with Indo-Pacific powers, including the US, Japan, Australia, and France.

With past diffidence receding, the revival of the Quad concept in late 2017 was more optimistic. Quad Navy Chiefs took the stage at the 2018 Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, thereby emphasising the security dimension of the grouping.¹⁴ In the same year, the IAF made a rare visit to foreign shores by visiting Australia to participate in the exercise PITCH BLACK.¹⁵ This was noteworthy, not only for the aerial refuelling assistance the host country provided to Indian Su-30MKI fighters in their transit,¹⁶ but also due to the fact that the IAF was joining a high-end multilateral air exercise (while its typical preference is for smaller bilateral exercises). This was a key indicator of both nations' confidence in their air force ties and the broader defence relationship.

Security Cooperation: Shaky Start, But Progressing

The resumption of the Quad is in no small part anchored on the renewed trust between Australia and India. Ministerial-level Quad meetings have taken place annually since 2019, with an uptick in bilateral ties among the four partners. Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update¹⁷ confirms its willingness to partner closely with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region. This has gone a long way in allaying Indian apprehensions over having Australia as a security partner.¹⁸

The bilateral relationship, propelled by Australia's own China challenges, as well as plurilateral engagement under the Quad, reached a new peak in 2020-2021. A virtual summit in June 2020 saw ties elevated to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', and the signing of a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) and a Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement.¹⁹ The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) also joined that year's MALABAR naval exercise, turning it into the first 'Quad exercise' since 2007. In February 2021, a RAN officer was formally posted to the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre -Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurgaon near the capital, marking an important milestone in formalised information-sharing between the two countries.²⁰

Today the India-Australia defence relationship encompasses almost every facet of military cooperation, including: high-level strategic dialogues; regional coordination; information-sharing; increasingly complex land, sea and air exercises; defence industry engagement; personnel exchanges; and scientific and technology cooperation.

“The resumption of the Quad is in no small part anchored on the renewed trust between Australia and India.”

Policy Recommendations

India and Australia have different military, diplomatic, technological, and legal capabilities and capacities. This is not to say that either country is necessarily lacking in any specific area, but that their respective strategic imperatives and force structure/posture lead to divergences in certain domains. However, this also means that a wide array of opportunities is available to both nations to enhance engagement; improve interoperability in the maritime, air, ground, and cyber domains; and deepen defence cooperation, including defence technology collaboration.

While national security is a “whole of government” effort in all countries, disaggregating economic and military power is a challenge. For the purposes of this paper, the economic health and viability of India, Australia, and the principal states in the region must be assumed to be relatively stable and moving toward a post-COVID recovery in line with global estimates.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that China’s coercive statecraft blurs the distinction between war and peace, for instance via ‘salami slicing’ tactics below an adversary’s threshold of military response. Countering this and achieving influence to counter China will be key to any defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

High-level requirements to counter China should guide the collaboration between India, Australia and key partners, and influence their decision-making. Further, cost-effective military cooperation will lower unilateral costs and allow for increased burden-sharing, while raising military costs for China. Meanwhile, economic ties will play a part in imposing political and economic costs on Beijing. However, these will also require a recalibration of conventional security thought in New Delhi and Canberra. India will certainly have to re-orient from a border-focused continental military to a more expeditionary air and sea force structure to counter harmful Chinese actions.

With the signing of the Mutual Logistics Sharing Agreement (MLSA) in June 2020, it is important to address the impact of nascent agreements and joint exercises. Further, the policies needed to bolster defence cooperation, interoperability, and regional security over the short, medium and long term, also need to be highlighted. Most importantly, the effect of security cooperation between Australia and India on regional security in the Indo-Pacific and how this cooperative framework can bring other like-minded countries within its fold, needs to be understood.

By developing “task-oriented” policy proposals, centred on common regional challenges, the objective is to encourage both countries to devote more energy and investment in the security realm to help manage the changing regional order in the Indo-Pacific. It also aims to generate a sense of burden-sharing, as well as reciprocity, without overloading governments and militaries that already face significant constraints.

This paper’s proposals are under two broad lenses: bilateral (India-Australia); and existing minilateral platforms of which the two countries are already participants, such as the Quad, India-Australia-Indonesia, and Japan-Australia-India trilateral.

Though there are multilateral forums in which India and Australia participate, the authors are giving preference to minilateral platforms, as the principal issue impinging the working of larger multilateral bodies is that consensus-building remains next to impossible except in the broadest of terms. A great number of voices make it harder to find consensus on specific issues that are not of immediate concern. These platforms become ‘talk shops’ without being able to generate concrete solutions.

This helps understand the growing salience of minilaterals and bilaterals in the region. Minilaterals also help in bolstering bilateral relations, such as the Quad helping revamp India-Australia relations, which was the weakest link in that arrangement. The India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral, which was carried by incumbent Indonesia-Australia relations, also helped strengthen ties between India-Australia, and between India-Indonesia. Minilaterals do have sceptics, and indeed the Quad did once falter, and had to be revived to its present state. Nevertheless, the example of the Quad itself shows that it and similar groupings have potential, as evidenced by Chinese reactions to any and all Quad initiatives, including the March 2021 summit and the Quad’s COVID-19 vaccine proposal.²¹

Defence Spending

In the Financial Year 2020-21 (FY 2021), India earmarked approximately 24 percent of its defence budget for capital acquisitions (approximately USD 15.6 billion).²² In February 2021, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated that India plans to spend about USD 130 billion on defence modernisation “over the next 7-8 years,”²³ which is approximately USD 185 billion spent over the decade, assuming no significant fluctuations in defence funding.

Meanwhile, Australia allocated 34 percent of its budget (approximately USD 11 billion) to capital procurement²⁴ in FY 2021. In July 2020, PM Morrison pledged to spend AUD 270 billion (approximately USD 186 billion) on defence over the coming decade.²⁵

Despite the Australian defence budget being approximately half of that of India's, Canberra's spending on acquisitions is not considerably lesser than New Delhi's. Regardless of India's imperatives to reform its capital-to-revenue spending ratio, the similarity in acquisition budgets and focus of both countries on the China challenge is a positive factor in the near term as it could allow for a better dovetailing of capability accretion, and alignment of acquisition priorities on both sides. However, challenges will remain beyond the acquisition landscape, as the two countries approach defence very differently.

With regard to force organisation, Australia has a mobile, expeditionary military posture, while India struggles to move past its continental military mindset. Moreover, bilateral and multilateral military cooperation pays off on longer time horizons, while the military and political leadership, particularly in New Delhi, tend to focus on near-term border issues with China and Pakistan. Incremental collaborative initiatives in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and Indo-Pacific will be key to easing India's diffidence toward a more expeditionary military posture. As a strong network of regional partnerships forms, the rationale for continuing to explore military options farther from home will become more apparent to India's political and military leadership.

Cooperation in the Operational Domain

It is important to note that while the proposed recommendations in the operational domain reflect that India-Australia military cooperation will be mainly related to the air and sea domains, a degree of flux in Indian military organisation must be considered. The establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) put in motion a range of proposals, including a move toward joint theatre commands. As such, the planned Maritime Theatre Command (MTC) will become the principal vector for military cooperation in the IOR and Indo-Pacific.

Though this will not change the contours of the envisaged cooperation itself, movement by the apex military leadership that will operationalise this — the theatre commander and air and maritime component commanders — will need to be accounted for as well.²⁶ Although the bilateral relationship may be naturally inclined toward maritime cooperation, a strategic partnership cannot

be one-dimensional. In the near term, instructor exchanges and collaborations in capacity-building for third countries are activities that can proceed with relatively low bureaucratic friction and will lay the groundwork for deeper ties between the two armies.

The nascent logistics sharing pact can enable more frequent and increasingly large and complex joint exercises, including high-end tri-service multi-domain exercises, in addition to expanding existing training missions involving personnel and knowledge exchanges. Though the present MLSA is a broad agreement suited for case-specific scenarios, such as pre-planned exercises and deployments, it is not specific enough to allow for routine logistics support. For instance, it allows for deployment and support of P-8s by either country, given sufficient notice and bureaucratic action, but does not make such deployments routine in the sense of true interoperability. The ideal end goal is to operationalise MLSA so that exercises, cross-basing, frequent deployments, and joint operations become administratively routine.

Therefore, an implementing arrangement (IA) under MLSA (MLSA-IA) is required, ideally signed by the same political dispensation that secured the MLSA as it would certainly require additional political and diplomatic input. This would create standard operating procedures and cover granular issues, such as payment terms and means, local security, and liability, thereby removing the bureaucratic ‘overhead’ that remains under the current terms. A middle step in this process could see narrow IAs defined and agreed upon by both countries, including important near-term requirements such as aerial refuelling, underway replenishment at sea, and port and air base support for transiting warships and aircraft. These would then lay the groundwork for a single comprehensive IA, taking the MLSA to its logical end state, and enabling extended reach and true interoperability between the two regional forces.

“The India-Australia relationship may be inclined toward maritime cooperation; but a strategic partnership cannot be one-dimensional.”

Beyond the obvious benefits, an operationalising agreement for MLSA would have immense signalling value in the Indo-Pacific to allies and adversaries. It would indicate that India is not all talk and implements agreements swiftly, thus attracting more advances from friendly nations that might have otherwise been sceptical of India’s commitment to regional cooperation. It would also signal to

China that there is a willingness among Indo-Pacific democracies to cooperate in real and meaningful terms. Thereafter, it is incumbent for both sides to keep MLSA alive through regular deployments, mutual logistics support, and visits. In the longer term, there is a need to move past exercises such as MALABAR, PITCH BLACK, AUSINDEX, and AUSTRALIND, and towards more operationally-oriented training, such as on terrain representative of Indian border areas, the Pacific Islands, and around IOR chokepoints.

MLSA should also expand cooperation in areas where it is currently lacking, such as air power, particularly given the importance of the speed and reach of air power in the predominantly oceanic theatre, where Australian and Indian interests lie. As an example, after aerial refuelling, a routine administrative activity under an MLSA-IA, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) tankers could refuel Indian P-8Is, which presently cannot be refuelled by any Indian aircraft. Indian P-8I crews would also require training to undertake 'flying boom' refuelling operations, which the RAAF would be well placed to provide.

Australian over-water air operations, expertise in Antarctic support and sustainment, and proximity to Indian research stations offer another area of collaboration across domains and services. Another near-term opportunity is synergising the two countries' strategic airlift capabilities through common platforms and concepts of operation, which will deliver practical benefits to the region and beyond during a range of emergent scenarios from armed conflict to natural disasters. Outreach opportunities that carry less diplomatic and political cost as compared to military operations, such as rescue, disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and more recently, vaccine distribution, are low-hanging fruits that can demonstrate the value of such cooperation.

Another issue with the MLSA is reciprocity. Australia has indicated a willingness to host Indian operations. India should offer similar facilities on the Indian mainland and its island territories. India and Australia could cooperate in capacity-building with third countries in the Indo-Pacific, with India taking the lead among IOR countries and Australia among Pacific Island nations. These activities could include port calls, senior official visits, training, and exercises in countries such as Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. Additionally, with the help of existing Indian military diplomatic outposts in the region, defence attachés representing Australia can be stationed at Indian Ocean littorals such as Comoros, Seychelles and Maldives. India could also encourage and facilitate agreements between Australia and other countries in the IOR to further secure an Australian foothold in the region.²⁷ The next development along these lines would be a Reciprocal Bases Agreement similar to the one that currently exists between Australia and Japan.

Information-Sharing

For an expanded defence relationship, classified information sharing is the next logical step. India-US defence ties and the ‘Foundational Agreements’ have followed a similar trajectory.^a India and Australia have already made headway in information sharing, with an extant agreement on white shipping Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and the posting of an Australian liaison officer at the IFC-IOR in India.

Creating a mechanism to share operationally relevant information, including on grey and dark shipping,^b with key Indo-Pacific partners would be the ideal extension of the MDA efforts already in place. More specific regional groupings could pursue this, such as the Quad, or other minilateral groupings, such as the India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral.

Tactical intelligence on the disposition of warships in the Indo-Pacific should not be particularly sensitive, as compared to underwater domain awareness (UDA). Owing to the US presence in the Indo-Pacific, the CENTRIX secure communications system is present and could possibly be utilised, but a separate secure communications system could also be explored to accommodate various national sensitivities.

Eventually, as these MDA initiatives foster greater trust and cooperation among friendly regional militaries, cooperation on UDA will also become increasingly viable. The principal hurdle is lack of a formal agreement on sharing this kind of classified information and, as in the case of MLSA, a robust framework within which to do so routinely. However, given that similar arrangements are already in place between India and the US, as well as India and France, it is clear that there is no in-principle opposition to information-sharing in New Delhi, thus creating fertile ground for a pact with Australia.

At a higher level, national intelligence agencies could pursue strategic intelligence sharing. In the long run, this could parlay into access to or inclusion in the Five Eyes alliance. Five Eyes is looking to expand and include within its fold third countries,²⁸ and there is a case for India’s inclusion under the Quad rubric. Here, the onus is on India to overcome its traditional reticence regarding intelligence cooperation and reciprocity.

a After protracted negotiations, a bilateral logistics agreement was signed in 2016, followed quickly by information sharing agreements- the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geo-Spatial Cooperation, allowing the US to share satellite and other surveillance data.

b Colour codes for global shipping distinguish between commercial vessels (white), military ships (grey) and illegal/unregistered ships (da

Leveraging Platform Commonality

The US ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific under the Obama administration, which was later termed ‘Rebalance to Asia’, centred on Darwin in Australia.²⁹ Despite domestic political upheaval, the US’s broad commitment to the Indo-Pacific and Australia has not changed under the Trump or Biden administration. This stability is an opportunity for India to be a part of this wider security cooperation, given the foundational agreements, particularly the logistics agreements, between the countries. However, US presence in the Indo-Pacific is not the only common link available.

Increasing equipment commonality between the Indian and Australian militaries can be leveraged for maintenance and logistics, with both countries operating a significant number of US-made C-17 and C-130 transports, P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, and CH-47 and MH-60R helicopters. With Australia selecting the AH-64 Apache as its next attack helicopter, and India considering the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet as its next naval fighter, the opportunities are only set to grow.³⁰

Economies of scale dictate that the two countries can benefit from sharing work centres for expensive maintenance and overhaul activities on these platforms, making their deployment and employment more cost effective by effectively amortising fixed costs. Over time, this burden sharing will translate into greater industrial cooperation by way of shared supply chains, and perhaps even raw material sourcing from either country. For instance, Australia’s ambitious national naval shipbuilding enterprise could benefit from Indian steel or collaboration with Indian shipyards, which are currently producing everything from patrol boats to aircraft carriers.

Institutional Collaborations

The long-delayed National Defence University (NDU) is an obvious opportunity for India to engage not only with Australia, but all its defence partners. Working with the Professional Military Education (PME) establishments of friendly militaries will ensure that NDU begins on a strong footing and continuing with personnel and instructor/faculty exchanges will be logical and self-reinforcing. Beyond this, expanding cooperation or instituting region-specific (e.g. IOR, Indo-Pacific) fellowships at universities, think tanks, and service academies, such as the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) and Army, Navy and Air Force War Colleges, specifically for Australia and other regional partners, will serve to create enduring defence and security links across the IOR and Indo-Pacific. These educational linkages between personnel will be essential in keeping

defence cooperation on track, especially in the absence of resources and time required to implement many of the more ambitious regional opportunities.

Outside military officialdom, there are also opportunities for public and private universities, colleges, and think tanks to collaborate on defence and security issues. The MoUs between the University of Wollongong and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) Kharagpur and Bombay³¹ are important starting points. Further, University of Wollongong and Gujarat National Law University (GNLLU) could sign MoUs to research on international law, focusing on international maritime law and the Law of the Sea, as the pursuit for maintenance of a rules based order lies at the core of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Government and private think tanks should engage deeply with each other by institutionalising exchanges and engaging in Track 2 or Track 1.5 dialogues on a regular basis. Policy input and outcomes from these would be vital not only in accelerating defence cooperation, but maximising the value of its outcomes. Broad based engagements across these varied fronts will also serve to greatly reduce friction at the highest and most consequential levels by fostering a closer understanding of each other's defence organisational systems.

Technology Cooperation

A series of India-Australia defence research and development collaborations have already taken place over the years.³² India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has hosted delegations from Australia in 2017 and a Joint Working Group on Defence Research and Materiel Cooperation between DRDO and Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG) met in 2018.³³ In June 2020, India and Australia signed a Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement,³⁴ providing a framework for defence cooperation between DRDO and DSTG. On the civilian front, India's Department of Science and Technology and Australia's Department of Industry, Innovation and Science already have a history of cooperation.³⁵

Moving forward, more government scientific agencies, state-owned and private industries, and academic institutes working on applied sciences, particularly focusing on the military domain, should collaborate with each other. Ensuring synergies across verticals will avoid missed opportunities, especially given the varying states of scientific research in both countries and the differing rules administering them. Despite recent engagement and the 2020 agreement, there is still a need to operationalise scientific cooperation by identifying specific areas and technologies for the two countries to explore in the short, medium, and long term.³⁶ Areas that can be explored in the near term include space, hypersonics, autonomous systems, underwater systems, and defence electronics.

Space is an emerging domain of strategic competition worldwide, yet remains under-developed in Australia. Improved ties with India are an opportunity to collaborate on military and civilian space programmes, including sharing infrastructure, technology, and technical know-how. India's principal launch site at Sriharikota is close to the equator (at 13.7 degrees latitude),³⁷ providing reasonably high launch energies, and is similar to the best obtainable on Australian soil. A proposed site further south, at Kulasekarapattinam,³⁸ is ideal for polar orbits. India could provide preferential access to launches, launch vehicles, and launch sites until Australia is able to develop its own.³⁹ Serious and sustained cooperation on space in the long term would lead to closer cooperation on defence and security focused applications to space, including communications, intelligence, and surveillance.

Hypersonic technology is sure to emerge as a key defence capability of the future. India and Australia are exploring it and both countries are early enough in development to justify sharing the burden. Presently, US, Russia, China, France, Japan, India, and Australia are moving ahead with developing hypersonic missile technology and have demonstrated progress.⁴⁰ There is a narrow window of opportunity for collaboration and development of hypersonic technology, as the broader international community is yet to arrive at a consensus on hypersonic arms control. Nevertheless, such controls are certainly in the offing, with a 2017 RAND report suggesting an early non-proliferation regime that would essentially exclude all countries except the US, Russia, and China.⁴¹ As with missiles or nuclear technology in the past, or emerging calls for controls on autonomous weapon systems,⁴² there is a danger that India and Australia might be left out of the hypersonic race before it has had a chance to start. Mutually supportive collaborations will accelerate the pace of development in both countries and create considerable heft at multilateral negotiations.

Autonomous platforms and manned-unmanned teaming are areas of research in which both countries are presently working on similar requirements and technologies. Given the focus on UDA and ongoing work on unmanned surface and underwater vessels in both countries, combining of requirements and resources towards this end would allow for extraction of greater value through increased economies of scale in the development and fielding of these technologies. India's state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics unveiled an ambitious, albeit unfunded, Combat Air Teaming System (CATS) in February 2021, envisioning a range of autonomous air vehicles and effectors operating in conjunction with, or at the direction of, crewed combat aircraft of the Indian military.⁴³

Meanwhile, Boeing Australia's Airpower Teaming System (ATS) made a maiden flight on 27 February 2021, demonstrating a maturity in the loyal wingman concept unprecedented outside the US.⁴⁴ Importantly, the Boeing ATS will be relatively unencumbered by the onerous export controls of US-developed unmanned systems, rendering the system ripe for collaboration, and thereafter an export market larger even than India and Australia combined. As noted, with discussions on global restrictions on autonomous weapons commencing, the window to decide on act on these and other similar programmes is shrinking. It is also important to ensure active participation in ascertaining global non-proliferation regimes when the opportunity is presented.⁴⁵

Working With Third Parties and Countries

India tends to be different from other members of the Quad grouping, as the rest are formal allies. Of the Quad powers, Australia is the only true Indo-Pacific nation. Thus, Indo-Australian defence cooperation assumes particular salience, whether bilaterally or within the Quad and other similar multilateral arrangements, as a result of this geographical reality.

India and Australia can work towards military capacity building in third countries of common interest, such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, and even Indian Ocean littorals such as Sri Lanka and Maldives. Work can happen in areas such as United Nations Peacekeeping Missions, HADR exercises which should not just involve the Navy but other agencies like the National Disaster Management Association (NDMA) and equivalent organisations in the other countries, low-end maritime training, anti-piracy operations, and patrols against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Joint Maritime Domain Awareness Initiatives can focus on the above mentioned areas. India and Australia can engage in defence exports, under lines of credit, to provide the necessary impetus to ASEAN countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Examples of possible exports are supply patrol vessels and frigates.

Further, the bilateral air power strategy dialogue between India and Australia and trilateral maritime dialogues and exercise in conjunction with Indonesia can expand to include the other Quad countries. Commencing as a Track 1.5 dialogue, it can later include table top exercises and war games.

Beyond defence, capacity building in third countries can also take place in the field of infrastructure connectivity, especially under the Indian initiative of Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), of which Australia is also

a part,⁴⁶ International Solar Alliance,⁴⁷ and by aiding digital connectivity in small island states of the IOR and the South Pacific. This can be done under the banner of the Quad and/or US Blue Dot program.

India, Australia, France, and Indonesia can form an Indian Ocean Environment Security Forum, along the lines of the Pacific Ocean Environment Security Forum, funded by the US Indo-Pacific Command. This forum can work with the small island littoral countries of the IOR on issues such as disaster shipping, IUU fishing, capacity building for small island states, and climate change.⁴⁸ This can be a part of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative. A HADR Coordination Mechanism already exists between Australia, New Zealand, and France for the Pacific Ocean. India, Australia, and Indonesia can develop a similar mechanism which focuses on the Indian Ocean.⁴⁹

“India and Australia can work on military capacity-building in third countries of common interest, such as Fiji, PNG, Timor Leste, and Indian Ocean littorals such as Sri Lanka and Maldives.”


This paper proposes that India and Australia explore defence cooperation in the sectors of defence spending, operational domain, information sharing, leveraging platform commonality, institutional collaborations, technology cooperation, and working with third parties/countries. These can be achieved by way of the following:

- Expanding cooperation in the operational domain by building on existing exercises and nascent logistics agreements to improve operational capabilities for both countries.
- Moving towards greater information sharing, particularly of classified intelligence.
- Better aligning of defence spending and leveraging equipment commonalities that have emerged and are emerging as the two countries modernise their militaries.
- Cooperation in the domains of space and emerging technologies, such as hypersonics. Autonomous platforms and manned-unmanned teaming are further areas of research that could be jointly pursued, with both countries presently working on similar requirements and technologies.
- In the longer term, true interoperability in the form of shared basing, Reciprocal Bases Agreement (such as between Australia and Japan), as well as development of joint bilateral or multilateral military institutions, such as a Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) centre in the Andamans or cooperative air and sea operations from the Christmas or Cocos (Keeling) Islands, should be explored.
- India and Australia could cooperate in capacity building with third countries in the Indo-Pacific, with India taking the lead among IOR countries and Australia among Pacific Island nations.

Despite opportunities, India and Australia continue to have mismatched military, diplomatic, technological, and legal capabilities and capacities. As this paper has outlined, there is a wide array of opportunities available to both countries to give their defence partnership a stronger footing. It is imperative that India and Australia continue advancing their military cooperation, adopting new forms of collaboration and expanding existing ties. It will be important to ensure that the future defence relationship is robust across military domains and moves beyond its maritime core.

Conclusion

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The challenge of securing and maintaining the rules-based order across two oceans emphasises the need for increased burden-sharing among like-minded powers in the region. Given the difficulties that the India-Australia defence relationship has faced in the past, both civilian and military leadership will need to be proactive in recognising and committing to the long-term security challenges facing both nations. 

“India and Australia should explore defence cooperation in the sectors of spending, operational domain, information sharing, leveraging platform commonality, institutional collaborations, technology, and working with third countries.”

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