

Evolving India-Australia Maritime Interface in the Indian Ocean

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31 July 2015

Naval engagements are significant as they are seen as instruments of diplomacy, building trust and confidence between the countries, as also increasing the interoperability between the navies.¹ The Indian Navy (IN) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) have scheduled their first ever combined naval exercises, IN-RAN, in October-November 2015, thereby deepening maritime ties between the two countries. The exercises also indicate the growing convergence of interests between India and Australia in the Indo-Pacific, wherein the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are considered to be “interdependent economic and strategic spaces, particularly in relation to maritime security of the long Asian littoral.”²

India-Australia Relations

Relations between India and Australia have undergone a number of ups and downs due to a number of political and strategic factors. First, during the Cold War era, India took a non-aligned stand, whereas Australia aligned itself with the USA. Second, India’s nuclear program was a major irritant in India-Australian ties. Third, India was preoccupied with its volatile neighbourhood, whereas the strategic focus of Australia lay in the Pacific Ocean, and it operated in the Asia-Pacific sphere. Lately, however, Canberra seems to be devoting much emphasis on its western maritime theatre of the Indian Ocean. The growing relevance of India in the regional dynamics is an important factor in Australia’s altered strategic calculus.

Australia's 2013 Defence White Paper articulated the Indo-Pacific as the 'logical extension' of the Asia-Pacific that "adjusts Australia's priority strategic focus to the arc extending from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia."³ It also announced Australia's economic and strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific is "driven by the major economic and strategic shifts that are now occurring in broader Asia, including the expansion of the strategic interests of China and India into the core areas of interests."⁴

Former Australian Senator Gareth Evans had defined Australia as an 'Indian Ocean nation, with considerable strategic and commercial interests in the region.'⁵ However, Australia's interests are largely lie in the north-eastern Indian Ocean⁶, encompassing Southeast Asia and Australia's northwestern border. Australia's interest in the region also lies in the security of its own gas fields located in the Northwest Shelf.⁷ Australia has been participating in naval operations to ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Yet, Australia preferred the term Asia-Pacific to describe its strategic sphere. It can be argued that the change in terminology from 'Asia-Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' indicates Australia's desire to include India in its strategic sphere.

Maritime Cooperation

The decision to conduct IN-RAN was taken in 2013, when then Defence Minister AK Antony met with his counterpart Stephen Smith in Australia. The IN and the RAN were involved in naval engagements since the 2000s. The RAN had participated in MALABAR 07 along with navies of India, USA, Japan and Singapore, and has also been involved in MILAN at Port Blair since 2003.

Increased joint naval collaboration, maritime security, and cooperation in various multilateral forums were always on the agenda in the India-Australia ties. Maritime security and piracy was also recognised as a priority area for cooperation.⁸ A stable Indo-Pacific⁹, the security of Asia-Pacific and enhanced cooperation in the Indian Ocean, and freedom of navigation in accordance with UNCLOS¹⁰ were discussed and mentioned in the joint statements released. In Framework for Security Cooperation established in November 2014, India and Australia agreed to hold regular bilateral

exercises, annual security dialogues on maritime security, including non-proliferation and disarmament.¹¹

Why India is important to Australia

The liberalization of the Indian economy, the USA-India rapprochement and growing economic relations have paved way for the growing cooperation between India and Australia.¹² India's nuclear program no longer remains an irritant. In September 2014, India and Australia signed the MoU for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper says that India will increasingly become important economically and strategically.¹³ Australia has also said that as New Delhi increases its reach and influence in the region, there is a need to "understand India's strategic thinking" as well as to strengthen defence ties with it.¹⁴ Australia recognises that India will play an instrumental role in maintaining peace and security not only in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) but also in the boarder Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵ Therefore, Australia seems to welcome India's raising naval power.

Australia also sees India as a potential economic partner in the Indo-Pacific region. Being an ally of USA and given its close economic relations with China, Australia risks getting caught in the cross-fire as USA and China contest for hegemony in the region. Given this situation, fostering stronger relations with India would enable Australia to hedge against any economic and security adversity.

Why Australia is important to India

During his visit to Australia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that Australia would no longer remain on the periphery but would be at the centre of India's vision.¹⁶ Australia is increasingly becoming crucial for India and is important for India's Act East Policy. Developing closer ties with Australia, in addition to good ties with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and ASEAN, would allow India to become an increasing presence.¹⁷ India also sees Australia as a security partner in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁸ Apart from this, Australia's resources can also fulfil India's increasing needs in terms of imports of coal, uranium and natural gas.¹⁹

India-Australia Maritime Convergences

Geographically, India and Australia are maritime nations. India is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, whereas Australia is situated on the rim of the India Ocean and Pacific Ocean.²⁰ Maritime security is one area where India and Australia's interests converge, and merit for cooperation.

The China Factor

China's increasing capabilities and aggressive posture in the South China Sea is a cause of concern for India and Australia. For Australia, this could lead to a "disconnect between Australia's economic (China) and strategic (USA) partnerships."²¹ India has an unresolved boundary dispute with China and New Delhi views China's increasing presence in the IOR with suspicion.

Rising China and the threat it posed to the regional order was always a cause of concern. A Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, with India, Australia, Japan and USA as its members, was proposed in 2007,²² but the idea was soon abandoned after China reacted strongly against it.

Regional Groupings

Both India and Australia have always believed in strong multilateral forums for a stable region. They have cooperated strongly in several multilateral platforms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), etc. In 2011, Australia and India were instrumental in placing maritime security issues on the IORA agenda through the formation of a maritime security group.²³ New Delhi and Canberra also agreed to cooperate in various regional and multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS); the ASEAN Regional Forum; and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).²⁴

Southeast Asia

With the intensification of India's Look East, now Act East Policy, and Australia's Look West Policy, Southeast Asia is an area of converging Indian and Australian interests. Australia also sees the Indo-Pacific as a "maritime domain with Southeast Asia at its

geographic center.”²⁵ The growth of Islamic terrorism is also a security concern. A politically stable Southeast Asia is in the interests of India and Australia. Hence, both the nations have agreed on “counter-radicalisation exchanges”.²⁶

Security of SLOCs

Secure and stable SLOCs are of paramount importance for both the nations because of the high volume sea borne trade. More than 90 per cent of India’s trade by volume, and 77 per cent by value is sea borne.²⁷ Australia, being a resource rich country, needs free sea lines for its trade and even as it develops its North-West Shelf as a major source of natural gas and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG).²⁸ Any disruption of SLOCs or blocking of choke points would have repercussions for both the Indian and Australian economies. During the Australia-India Security Roundtable held in 2005, participants agreed that Indian and Australian interests converged in the eastern Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca.²⁹

Non-Traditional Threats

The region is plagued by a number of non-traditional security threats and challenges such as piracy, narcotics, humans and arms trafficking, IUU fishing, natural disasters³⁰, and illegal immigration. Australia’s northern shoreline is quite vulnerable to trafficking as well as illegal immigration. Countering these threats is another area for cooperation. Fisheries management³¹/ IUU fishing is also a major challenge for the regional countries, which could be addressed through India-Australia cooperation.

Freedom of Navigation

India and Australia believe that “freedom of navigation in accordance with the principles of international law is critical for the growth and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region.”³² Australia reckons that the conflict in South China Sea has the potential to destabilize the whole region; however, this could be tricky for Australia as China is its largest economic partner.

Scope for Maritime Cooperation

Being major maritime powers, there is a high potential for maritime cooperation between India and Australia, which is being explored. India already plays an important role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean, whereas Australia has started to play an enhanced political and security role in the Indian Ocean. Australia has started also to “rebalance its naval and other defence resources to the Indian Ocean.”³³

Maritime cooperation can also include intelligence sharing as well as training of personnel. Both the countries can cooperate in Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) as well as Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. Curbing illegal migration is another area for collaboration. The maritime engagements will also include cooperation between the Indian Coast Guard and the Australian Border Force. Various multilateral groupings can be used as platforms for addressing maritime issues diplomatically.

Divergences

China

Even as the ‘fear of an unpredictable China’³⁴ is a converging factor in India-Australian relations, the same can also be seen as a divergent factor. Ostensibly, Indian and Australian views on China differ, which could lead to a possible ‘disconnect’ between the two countries. Australia seems to be more tolerant of Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as it believes that peaceful and stable relations between the USA and China are essential for “continued stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”³⁵ India, on the other hand, is circumspect on China’s naval build up and increasing presence in the IOR.

Pakistan

Australia has been trying to bring Pakistan on board the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)³⁶, now renamed as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Given the turbulent India-Pakistan relations, this could be possible reason for discord. Australia has been assisting Pakistan in capacity building to counter “serious and sophisticated crime” through several training programmes and by supplying

“specialist training equipment”.³⁷ Therefore, Australia-Pakistan ties could be seen as potential irritant in the evolving India-Australia ties in the future.

Trilateral Naval Exercises

As India and Australia deepen their maritime relations and enjoy strong ties with the USA, there is a possibility of a trilateral framework in the Indian Ocean. It has been argued that the India-Australia-USA trilateral could ‘complement’ the already established trilateral framework between India-Japan-USA and Australia-Japan-USA.³⁸ A possible trilateral naval exercise between India-Australia-Japan is also on cards as the high level representatives of the three nations met in New Delhi for discussions in which maritime security topped the agenda. The security of SLOCs is paramount for India, Japan and Australia. The Indian, Japanese and Australian navies have been participating actively in combating piracy and trafficking in IOR. Once again, USA is a common element here. The question is: will the ‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ be revived? Any sort of trilateral in the region might invite strong reactions from China, as it did during the MALABAR 07 and when the idea of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was first proposed.

The Australian diplomat Peter Varghese had said that the meeting should not be seen as an ‘anti-China Front’.³⁹ But China cannot be ignored, as the three nations discussed about freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

With Australia shifting its focus from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, there will be more interactions between India and Australia in the maritime domain. The combined naval exercises will not only deepen the cooperation, but will also ensure greater coordination between IN and RAN. For Australia, the country of interest in region will primarily be India. Australia also believes that India will play a larger role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. However, the China factor cannot be ignored in the evolving India-Australian maritime cooperation since they share similar views on the freedom of navigation, especially in the South China Sea. Therefore, it will be important to watch China’s reaction to the deepening maritime ties between India and Australia, and the possible trilateral ties in the Indo-Pacific.

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Notes

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³ Defence White Paper 2013, Department of Defence, Australian Government, p.7. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed on 12 July, 2015)

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⁵ Gareth Evans, 'The Indian Ocean Region: An Australian Perspective', *Lanka Guardian*, 11 (1995): 18

⁶ Sandy Gordon, 'Australia-India', in *Australia as an Asian-Power Regional Power: Friendship in Flux?* (ed.) Brendon Taylor, New York: Routledge, 2007, p.89

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joint Press Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of Australia to India, Ministry of External Affairs, <http://bit.ly/1Ia0ffm> (accessed 14 June 2015)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Minister for Defense and India's Minister of Defence – Joint Statement – Visit of Mr. AK Antony, Defence Minister of India, Ministry of External Affairs, <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2013/06/05/minister-for-defence-and-indias-minister-of-defence-joint-statement-visit-of-mr-a-k-antony-defence-minister-of-india-to-australia-4-5-june-2013/> (accessed July 19, 2015)

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¹³ Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030, Department of Defence, Government of Australia, p.36. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2009/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf (accessed on 17 June 2015)

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¹⁵ 2013 Defence White Paper, p.16, n.3

¹⁶ Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Address to the Joint Session of Australian Parliament, <http://www.narendramodi.in/prime-minister-narendra-modis-address-to-the-joint-session-of-the-australian-parliament> (accessed on 17 June 2015)

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- ¹⁹ According to recent news reports, India is likely to begin importing Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Australian by the end of 2015. For more details see: http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/australian-lng-to-cost-nearly-half-the-price-of-qatar-gas-115021000605_1.html.
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- ²³ David Brewster, *The India-Australia Security Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges*, Gateway House, p.50, n.18
- ²⁴ Framework for Security Cooperation between India and Australia, Ministry of External Affairs, n.11
- ²⁵ Defence White Paper 2013, p.8, n.3
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- ³¹ Joint Press Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of Australia to India, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, n.8
- ³² Minister for Defense and India's Minister of Defence – Joint Statement – Visit of Mr. AK Antony, Defence Minister of India, n.10
- ³³ David Brewster, *Looking West and Acting West*, n.4
- ³⁴ Ashok Kapur, 'India and Australia', *Aakrosh*, 16 (2015): 18.
- ³⁵ Defence White Paper, p.10, n.3.
- ³⁶ David Brewster, *The India-Australia Security Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges*, n.18.

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³⁸ David Scott, Australia's embrace of the 'Indo-Pacific': new term, new region, new strategy, *International Relations of Asia-Pacific*, 12 (, <http://www.d-scott.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Australia-Indo-Pacific-online.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2015).

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