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Australia–India Reengagement:
Common Security Concerns, Converging Strategic Horizons, Complementary Force Structures

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Australia and India have covered a considerable distance since bilateral defence and security relations were re-established—after a two-and-a-half year hiatus—in 2000. What began as a modest attempt by both sides to return to the pre-May 1998 level of security relations has, in the ensuing four years, been significantly deepened, strengthened and enriched. With the benefit of hindsight, it would appear

Cartography by Keith Mitchell

that the unseemly public squabble between Canberra and New Delhi after India's nuclear tests forced both sides, with Australia perhaps taking the lead, to re-evaluate their respective national interests in maintaining the bilateral relationship. When defence and security relations were re-established, each country was therefore able to reengage the other with a far more realistic and clear-eyed appraisal of the limits and possibilities of their mutual relationship.

High level visits have played a necessary and important part in the process of bilateral reengagement. The visits to India by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Prime Minister John Howard, in March and July 2000 respectively, signalled Australia's desire for a new beginning in bilateral relations. These visits were 'returned' by India in a matter of months: then External Affairs and Defence Minister Jaswant Singh visited Australia in June 2001, and again in early 2002 to participate in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. High level interaction between the two countries has continued in the Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue, the third meeting of which was held in Adelaide in August 2003, as well as in the Strategic Dialogue between senior officials which began in 2003. Thus, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that, four years on, the habit of dialogue between the governments of Australia and India, particularly on strategic matters, is now well established.

A novel feature of the Australia–India defence and security reengagement has been the institution of the Australia–India Security Roundtable, an annual 'second track' initiative that has been successfully held three times: in New Delhi (2001), Sydney (2002) and Chandigarh (2003). The foresight and support of the Australia India Council, as well as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, have made such meetings possible. The security roundtable provides a regular opportunity for security and defence analysts from the two countries to share their views and promote better mutual understanding on a range of bilateral, regional and global issues of concern to Australia and India; discuss ways for the two countries to work more closely together; and make recommendations to their respective governments for further developing the bilateral defence and security relationship. The presence of senior government officials in the roundtable deliberations as observers has meant that the 'second track' has fed into government-level talks between the two countries on the future of the bilateral relationship and broader national security in each country.

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While the strides taken to enhance bilateral security relations since 2000 are significant, regular interaction at both the official and 'second track' levels is a process that requires continuous institutional effort and political backing. Australia–India dialogue on security matters over the last four years has built the foundation for a more substantial and predictable security relationship. However, the high degree of ease and closeness that typically characterises security relations between friendly states is still some way from being achieved. For their security relations to become more concrete, the security dialogue in the future needs to move beyond discussions, important though they are, and focus on increasing the number of bilateral exchanges and other forms of practical cooperation.

Indian leaders, R to L, Speaker of the House Somnath Chatterjee, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrive at Parliament House in New Delhi, 7 June 2004. AP via AAP/Elizabeth Dalziel © 2004 The Associated Press

In the parliamentary system that Australia and India share, regular prime ministerial visits have an important role to play: by reflecting the newfound importance of the bilateral relationship, they would give the process of renewed engagement further boost. It is eighteen years since an Indian Prime Minister has visited Australia. The possibility of regular prime ministerial meetings, perhaps in either country in alternate years, should therefore be given serious consideration. A new Congress-led government in India provides an opportunity for further vigour in the bilateral relationship.

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Four years on, the defence and security dialogue has progressed to a point that three fundamental questions can no longer be evaded: Do Australia and India face common security concerns, and perhaps even threats? Furthermore, are the strategic horizons of the two countries converging? Finally, are their respective force structures and security doctrines complementary or not? Unless the answers to all three questions are in the affirmative, the potential for defence and security cooperation between Australia and India would necessarily remain restricted.

Common security concerns

As Australia and India have reengaged with each other on defence and security matters, the world around them has been transformed in an elemental way. The attacks on the United States on September 11 2001 brought the issue of terrorism to the centre of international security and indeed world politics. India, which had been combating terrorism for much of the last two decades, found its national security impacted upon in contradictory ways by the new global focus on terrorism. Australia, for its part, discovered new vulnerabilities in the aftermath of the October 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali. Thus, terrorism has emerged as the most pressing security concern that Australia and India share.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, terrorism presents a 'clear and present danger' to both Australia and India. Furthermore, terrorism is intrinsically inimical to the democratic principles that are the bedrock of politics in both countries, and to which both are firmly committed. Thus, Australia and India have a common interest in working together—in concert with the international community—to combat (i.e., prevent, deter and mitigate) all forms of terrorism. Reflecting the shared security concern, an MOU on Terrorism was signed between the two countries during the Indian External Affairs Minister's visit to Australia in August 2003.

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There is much that Australia and India can do together in the field of counter-terrorism; indeed, they have barely scratched the surface of cooperation on this issue-area. Enhanced intelligence sharing, especially actionable intelligence transmitted in real time, is of paramount importance in the counter-terrorism campaigns of both countries. Intelligence sharing can be enhanced, in the first instance, by exchanging police liaison officers. Dialogue between the police forces of both countries, at both the federal/union and state levels, with a view to developing effective counter-terrorism cooperation, would be another important step in the right direction. Regular consultation on the nature and level of terrorism in regions of common concern, such as South and Southeast Asia, is also essential. Both countries have a common interest in cooperating to break the nexus between organised crime and terrorism, as

also in stemming all kinds of resource flows to terrorist organisations. As Australia–India counter-terrorism cooperation matures, enhanced links between the special forces of both countries could also become a possibility.

Clearly, the salience of terrorism as an issue-area in world politics will diminish with the passage of time. Nevertheless, counter-terrorism is likely to remain very high on the security agenda of liberal democracies like Australia and India for a long time to come. The two countries will therefore continue to share this common security concern.

Converging strategic horizons

From a geopolitical perspective, the strategic horizons of Australia and India obviously converge in the eastern Indian Ocean. The two countries should therefore find ways to work together as elements of stability in a region that has seen increasing turbulence in recent years. Closer maritime cooperation between Australia and India would thus promote regional stability, safety at sea and a cleaner Indian Ocean.

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As a first step, discussions should be held between the Royal Australian Navy and the Indian Navy to explore the possibility of joint naval activity in the eastern Indian Ocean, preferably in collaboration with naval forces in Southeast Asia. The establishment of direct communication links between Maritime Commander, Australia and the General/Flag/Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Andaman and Nicobar Command would be a concrete contribution to regional stability. Going beyond the naval forces of the two countries to maritime policy more broadly, practical cooperation between India's Department of Ocean Development and the agencies that manage Australia's Antarctica and Ocean policies is essential and needs to be more fully explored.

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The eastern Indian Ocean is especially prone to a range of transnational threats that Australia–India maritime cooperation could do much to ameliorate and prevent. For instance, there could be active collaboration between the two countries to combat piracy/terrorism at sea, and also human trafficking/people smuggling in the Indian Ocean region. Australia and India could work toward the creation of mechanisms and procedures for disaster management and environmental protection in the eastern Indian Ocean, particularly with regard to oil spills.

Apart from maritime cooperation, there are other issues on which Australian and Indian interests coincide. For instance, both countries have a common interest in the stability and unity of Indonesia and support the further development of Indonesia's democratic institutions. Both Australia and India support measures to maintain a peaceful transition process in Afghanistan and efforts to bring stability to Iraq and other states in transition. Thus, the two countries could work together—within the Commonwealth,

for example—to strengthen security, administration and governance in states in transition.

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Looking beyond the eastern Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, both Australia and India have a shared interest in promoting multilateral security forums in the Asia Pacific region. In the area of arms control and disarmament, both countries could embark on greater information exchange and sharing of expertise on chemical and biological weapons, including working together to ensure that the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention are implemented effectively.

Nevertheless, significant issues still remain to be worked out in the bilateral security dialogue. Most important of all, from an Indian perspective, is whether India is likely in the coming years to be considered an integral part of the democratic core of states. If yes, then Australia–India security cooperation should blossom over time into an alliance relationship. If not, India will probably intensify its quest for security self-sufficiency and strategic autonomy, maybe in the overall context of a cooperative security arrangement in the Asia Pacific–Indian Ocean region. While the latter possibility would not necessarily be inimical to Australia's security, it would sharply constrict the possibility of Australia–India security cooperation. Thus, Canberra perhaps has a vested interest in India's entry into the security community of liberal democracies.

Complementary force structures

The fact that Australia and India have force structures that are so fundamentally different in shape and size is a factor that must be acknowledged. Australia's military has been described as a 'boutique' force—small in size, highly mobile, superbly trained, high-tech and lethal in its performance of certain critical niche tasks. India's military, on the other hand, is one of the world's great 'militaries of mass'—enormous, manpower-intensive; yet, for all that, a highly trained volunteer force with an age-old martial culture and a long tradition of war fighting. How can two military establishments, that are as self-evidently unalike as chalk and cheese, actually cooperate?

In the first place, there are many areas in which the defence establishments and armed forces of the two countries, despite their obvious dissimilarities, share expertise: Special Forces, naval operations and peacekeeping duties are just three of the areas in which useful exchange of training procedures and sharing of operational experience is possible. In areas where the two military establishments are dissimilar, the two sides potentially have even more to learn from the experiences of the other. Thus, the scope for regular consultations on defence planning and force structuring is vast and needs to be thoroughly explored.

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The increased cooperation between the two countries in the higher education sector could be expanded to include a security focus, particularly in the respective military schools and colleges, and also in partnerships between universities and research institutes.

Australian Naval frigate HMAS *Adelaide* docking in Chennai, 9 June 2003. AFP/AAP/Sarkar © 2003 AFP

Regular exchange programs between Indian and Australian strategic centres and institutes, with the express purpose of enhancing links and broadening the understanding of each country in the strategic community of the other, need to be set in place. This initiative would have a direct impact in terms of more comprehensive and realistic reporting on each country in the news media of the other. In this respect, commemorating the shared military history of Australia and India in the

First and Second World Wars could also be an important 'cementing factor' between the armed forces of the two countries.

Conclusion

Australia and India share an immediate common security concern—terrorism. Their respective strategic horizons, in the eastern Indian Ocean and beyond, are fast converging. Their military establishments—a 'boutique' force and a 'mass' force—are complementary: they have much to learn from the other, both in areas where they share expertise as well as in areas of glaring dissimilarities. There is therefore significant scope for closer strategic and security cooperation between Australia and India.*

* Participants in the 2003 Australia–India Security Roundtable agreed to an Outcomes Statement as a result of their discussions. The key recommendations have been outlined above and the full text of the statement can be found at http://www.aspi.org.au/pdf/Outcomes_2003.pdf

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