

The Strategic Logic of India-Australia Relations

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The coming visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Australia comes close on the heels of the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abott's state visit to India last month. Diplomatic airwaves have charged with PM Modi's recent foreign tours, and a visit to Australia for a bilateral enhancement and the multilateral G20 summit is no different. Though the India-Australia relationship has been on the strategic radar screen for some time now, an Indian Prime Minister visiting that country in 28 years makes it significant. The strategic convergence emerging between India and Australia has made inroads into Indian foreign policymaking cutting across party lines, and its sustainability depends on how successive governments put the bricks.

As with many other bilateral relations, the structural constraints of the Cold War period and later divergent approaches to nuclear issues have generally prevented the two countries from reaping mutual benefits. It is only with the coming of the new millennium that most of the predicted post-Cold War opportunities began to be realized with the reciprocal change of perceptions between India and Australia and other western countries including the United States. With increasing engagement between the two countries and the political opening that the Indo-US nuclear deal and the NSG waiver for India gave, the civilian nuclear front has seen significant strides. Both sides have welcomed the signing of the India-Australia bilateral Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, which will enable the sale of Australian uranium to India. Given the rising demand for energy to feed India's development trajectory, this is indeed a vital component of the upsurge in the relationship, the fruits of which needs to be realized soon.

The confidence and enthusiasm that the new Indian Prime Minister enjoys domestically and internationally is something that needs to be capitalized to reap tangible benefits not only in India-Australia relations, but also in how the two countries can create synergies among the strategic interests of stakeholders in the emerging geopolitical construct of Indo-Pacific. Both the countries see their interests in the Asian power balance of power that prevents the rise of a single hegemonic power. The trade corridors that the confluence of the two oceans covers necessitates greater meeting of minds vis-à-vis maritime engagement to deter state and non-state actors from destabilizing the region and its economic vitality.

The emerging defence cooperation between the two countries, covering all the services and efforts towards interoperability is germane to the sustainability of the relationship. A Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation as well as a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation have been signed and frequent and regular exchanges at each other training institutes and seminars have only intensified the seriousness of engagement in this sector. Preparations are on for the inaugural bilateral maritime exercise scheduled for 2015. Concrete steps are underway for a more effective practical cooperation in the Indian Ocean Regional

Association (IORA), with emphasis on the six priority areas of maritime security and piracy, fisheries management; disaster risk reduction; tourism and cultural exchanges, academic and S&T cooperation, and trade and investment facilitation.

The bedrock of any relationship is the economic component. As Prime Minister Modi intensifies his 'Make in India' Campaign and his advocacy of the three Ds: democracy, demand and demography as India's trump card, energizing the economics of the relationship assumes all the more importance. A White Paper titled 'The Australia- India Trade Relationship -- Past, Present and Future possibilities' produced jointly by the Australia India Business Council (AIBC) and Australia India Institute (AII), has emphasized the need to reverse the declining trend in India-Australia economic ties. According to reports, Australian exports to India fell 22 percent in 2013 to A\$12 billion (\$10.2 billion), compared to the A\$40 billion goal by 2015 set for India-Australia trade. Both sides during PM Abott's visit welcomed the progress towards a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) that would support a significant expansion of two-way trade and investment.

Given recent history regarding security of Indian students in Australia and its implications for educational ties between the two countries, cooperation in this field needs augmentation, with transparent mechanisms for addressing grievances. Moreover, efforts towards track 1.5 and track two dialogues involving institutes from both sides that have already gained ground, needs to be encouraged. As has become commonplace on PM Modi's foreign visits in recent times, especially in countries with sizeable Indian diaspora, media attention on symbolism is guaranteed. Reports say that he is expected to draw 16,000 people to his rally in Sydney on Monday, while 270 people have booked on the "Modi Express" train for fans, which will run from Melbourne to Sydney. While debates will continue on the symbolism-substance dichotomy, the big picture or the strategic logic of a stable Indo-Pacific should be nurtured and nourished, which is certain to have dividends not only for the bilateral relationship alone but also for the region as a whole.

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