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Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper

An Indian Perspective

*Udai Bhanu Singh**

Australia's comprehensive strategic approach towards the Indo-Pacific region and a renewed interest in the Indian Ocean has served to rekindle its relationship with India. Australia's recently released 2016 Defence White Paper (DWP 2016) demonstrates that a growing convergence in strategic approaches can be discerned as Australia looks West and India begins to 'Act East'.

If Prime Minister (PM) Modi's Act East policy seeks to inject a more proactive energy in India's Look East policy, the DWP 2016 is a more 'forward' document than its predecessors in presenting 'geographically forward defense posture and pattern of engagement in the region'.¹ The Australian government issued some guiding papers earlier, such as the 2013 Defence White Paper, Australia in the Asian Century White Paper (October 2012) and a National Security Strategy document (January 2013). These spell out the government policy approach towards Asia, with implications for India. In the strategic realm, the unprecedented rise of China has certainly posed numerous challenges for countries of the region, including India and Australia. China's aggressive moves in the South China Sea and East China Sea have created an uncertain situation for its smaller neighbours and have raised concerns about the rise of China. This has also influenced Australia's outlook regarding its own role in this new century. India does not believe in a policy of

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'balancing' China and possibly Australia does not see any advantage in provoking China. But both share common concern regarding China and see merit in coordinating their approach towards it.

India's domestic and foreign policies underwent an important change in the early 1990s with the introduction of liberal economic reforms. India also increased its focus on its extended neighbourhood and began pursuing the Look East Policy (LEP). This, in turn, was responsible for changing the mindset of countries to India's east and opened up new possibilities of engaging with Australia. This process, in which Australia on its part abandoned past concerns regarding a growing Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean, was accelerated in the second phase of LEP. This was manifested in increased trade, enhanced military to military exchanges, educational linkages and accelerated India-Australia nuclear commerce. The improvement in India-Australia relations was helped along by the US pivot to Asia policy. As the White Paper 'Australia in the Asian Century' indicated, Australia's gaze has shifted from its west coast to the east coast, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. Its business sees an opportunity in India's burgeoning middle class and is willing to extend its operations.

The Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific, has once again come into the limelight with significant transformations in the economic and strategic spheres (see Appendix Figure 1). This presents as much an opportunity as a challenge. Since India is keen on engaging its extended neighbourhood and protecting its maritime interests too, there is scope to partner with it is important for it to work together with Australia.

BACKGROUND

There is a strong historical legacy of cooperation between the Australian and Indian armies. Indian and Australian soldiers have fought on the same side (an 'entente most remarkable') during World War I in Gallipoli and along the Western front, in which 1,600 Sikhs, Gurkhas and Muslims were killed. Peter Stanley observes on the campaign that, although a costly disaster, 'Australians and Indians can look back on a century of shared endeavour and a relationship that has grown—not always easily or steadily—but which can find in the shared ordeal of Gallipoli a common history.'² During Modi's visit to Australia, it was agreed to commemorate the historic experience of being comrades in arms (including the World War I centenary and have their respective national broadcasters co-produce a film on Gallipoli).

India and Australia signed the Memorandum on Defence Cooperation in 2006 and a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation was issued by the prime ministers of India and Australia in 2009. The two countries also issued a joint statement in 2012, when the then Australian Premier, Julia Gillard, visited India. This was followed, in June 2013, by the visit of then Indian Minister of Defence, A.K. Antony, to Australia. This visit, the first by an Indian defence minister, was also notable for discussions on maritime cooperation (including agreement to start bilateral naval exercise in 2015) and an agreement to enhance bilateral defence cooperation.³ Besides, the joint statement that the then respective defence ministers (A.K. Antony and Stephen Smith) signed, centred around the primacy of international law to ensure maritime security and the freedom of navigation in the larger Asia Pacific region and the Indian Ocean region.⁴

RECENT INTERACTIONS

Tony Abbott, former Australian PM, visited India soon after the 2014 general elections (4–5 September 2014): the highlight was the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, but maritime cooperation was also on the agenda. Australia, which has 40 per cent of the world's uranium, opened the door for its export to India. The Indian PM reciprocated the visit the same year. Narendra Modi's visit from 16–18 November 2014 was the first by an Indian PM to Australia in 28 years, thereby reassuring that Australia would be at the centre of India's thoughts and not on the periphery. Five bilateral pacts were signed during the visit. The two countries concluded a new Framework for Security Cooperation to guide closer bilateral collaboration across the security spectrum, including in defence, counter-terrorism, cyber policy, disarmament and non-proliferation and maritime security. They agreed to work together to combat terrorism and other transnational crimes. An Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons and a counter-narcotics memorandum of understanding (MoU) were also signed. The two prime ministers agreed to extend defence cooperation to cover research, development and industry engagement. It was further agreed to hold regular defence minister-level meetings and conduct regular maritime exercises and have regular talks, respectively, among the staff of the three wings of their armed forces. Also welcomed was India–Australia cooperation at various multilateral forums, like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), boosting of regional trade eventually through

the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and efforts concerning humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

A DWP serves not only to communicate to the domestic constituency the government's financial outlays and policies, but also its strategic intentions and concerns to 'allies, partners and potential adversaries'.⁵ The delay in the release of the DWP 2016 (it was due for release in October 2015) has to be seen in the context of the change of leadership in Canberra; and an element of uncertainty persists with the current PM Malcolm Turnbull's policy under attack by Abbott.⁶

The significance of this Framework for Security Cooperation can be gauged from the fact that it finds mention in the DWP. According to paragraph 5.70 of DWP 2016: 'In line with the Framework for Security Cooperation, the Government will seek to further mature our defence relationship with India in support of our shared strategic interests.'⁷ The DWP mentions that this would be done by means of strategic dialogue, bilateral training⁸ and exercises. The naval exercises showcase naval preparedness and seek to engender trust among the participating countries. The Indian Navy's INS Sahyadri attended Australia's International Fleet Review in 2013. When India's Eastern Naval Command hosted its International Fleet Review in the Bay of Bengal off Vishakhapatnam in February 2016, Australia also sent an Adelaide-class guided-missile frigate, HMAS Darwin.⁹ Earlier, Australia has participated in the Milan naval exercise in 2014. However, Australia remains excluded from the Malabar Exercise as of now. The start of Malabar Exercise (begun as an Indo-US bilateral naval exercise) almost coincided with the start of India's Look East policy. Japan was added as a non-permanent member in 2007 in the face of Chinese protests. By inviting Japan to participate in Malabar 2015 exercise in the Bay of Bengal, New Delhi's position seems to have gravitated closer to the Japanese contention that the Pacific and Indian Oceans are 'oceans of freedom and prosperity'¹⁰ and the US' declared policy of Asia-Pacific rebalance. The two countries will 'strengthen cooperation in maritime security, counter-terrorism, capability acquisition and defence science and technology'. The two countries also undertake to hold annual Defence Policy Talks and annual 1.5 Track Defence Strategic Dialogue (both hosted by India in 2013).

Even though Australia is out of the Malabar Exercise, China still has apprehensions that the idea of the 'quad' of 2008, or the maritime quadrilateral, may be getting revived. In 2015 (11–19 September), the

Indian and Australian navies conducted their first bilateral maritime exercise (AUSINDEX-15) on the east coast of India.¹¹ This occurred soon after the US–Japan–Australia trilateral exercise in the South-West Pacific in July 2015. This has been interpreted by several analysts as an attempt at ‘securing the Asian commons’¹² at a time when China has been busy in island reclamations and submarine redeployment.

Again, it is in the overall regional context the DWP 2016 has to be seen. Para 5.71 of DWP 2016 states that the ‘Act East’ policy not only offers an avenue for bilateral interactions but also multilateral interactions (in the Indo-Pacific), through forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ADMM-Plus, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)¹³ This widens the scope of military-to-military exchanges or high-level visits, like that of Indian Chief of Army Staff in 2013. The Civil Nuclear Agreement, signed (September 2014) and ratified by India and Australia, has come into force with effect from 13 November 2015.

The DWP 2016, in its chapter two on strategic outlook, in para 2.93, states: ‘India is an increasingly important economic and security partner for Australia and we share key interests in regional stability and order.’¹⁴ The Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) negotiations between the two countries is continuing, with both sides having exchanged two rounds of offers in goods and services market access.¹⁵ Para 2.94 states: ‘In addition to having a stronger role in the Indo-Pacific region, India is also likely to become a more active and influential global power, supported by its economic growth.’¹⁶ Thus, the strategic significance of Australia–India relationship is intimately tied up with the economic linkages.

The DWP 2016 notes that India’s defence modernisation of its armed forces and participation in the regional security architecture, particularly through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and IORA, supports Australia and India’s shared interests in Indian Ocean security. India is also increasing its security partnerships, including with Australia, the US, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Elsewhere in chapter five, para 5.17, the DWP notes that while Australia’s highest priority will be the alliance with the US, it will seek to ‘mature and deepen practical engagement with partners across the Indo-Pacific, particularly Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, India and China’.¹⁷ Para 5.68 states: ‘India is a rising major power and Australia welcomes its increasingly active role in Indo-Pacific security’¹⁸;

and para 5.69 states, 'Australia sees India as a key security partner in the Indian Ocean and broader Indo-Pacific security'.¹⁹

It may be recalled that the 2013 Australian DWP too had laid emphasis on relations with India and Indonesia. But the DWP 2016 does not provide a credible plan for 'realising the potential of Australia–Indonesia defence cooperation'.²⁰

THE WAY FORWARD

Thus, DWP 2016 was guided by Australia's requirement for a modern, advanced defence force, and what is important is that it has indicated the funds for it. It has factored in it the rise of China, India and Indonesia. However, its reference to China (without naming and obliquely referring to it as 'newly powerful') is inappropriate as 'China views itself not as newly emerging, but as re-emerging'.²¹ The Paper has effectively highlighted the shift of focus to Indo-Pacific. The increased defence cooperation with the US is indicated through increased marine rotation through Darwin and increased cooperation with United States Air Force (USAF). The US submarines and major surface warships could also operate from HMAS Stirling, south of Perth. It is clear that Australia has heightened concerns about tension in the South China Sea: Foreign Minister Julie Bishop had brought up at the EAS in Malaysia, 'We are deeply concerned that there may be militarisation of artificial reefs and structures and we called a halt to that as well...about 70 per cent of Australia's trade is through the South China Sea.'²² The Abbott government too had focused on naval rather than land-based security, thereby justifying purchase of more submarines. The release of China's White Paper on Military Strategy, in late May 2015, no doubt has had an impact on Australian defence, as a

regional state is officially developing the full suite of conventional military capabilities and now also the doctrine to pose a direct threat to Australia and its vital interests. This is a big change...Today, as a basis for defence planning, that threat is finally materialising in the form of China's blue-water navy.²³

Why is DWP 2016 important to India? It is of interest to India to the extent that there is growing convergence in global and regional outlooks. Globally, it talks about a 'rules-based' order. Regionally, Australia shows concern about the developments in the South China Sea by committing more resources. India, like its Asian neighbours, seeks to

resolve the dilemma of how to respond to the rise of China, which is seen to be increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Vietnam, Japan and the Philippines face a continuing maritime threat from China. Countries are hedging by expanding cooperation.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific, which the Australians speak of with favour (and which has gained traction in India too), and India's own 'Act East' policy seem to converge. India's Act East policy has extended India's interests right up to the Pacific islands, and PM Modi's visit to the Pacific islands and the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation in August 2015 are testimony to that.²⁴ There is also the US' own rebalance strategy, and India's signing of the US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

Within the framework of at least two important triads, India and Australia can work together. First is the India–Indonesia–Australia triad: closer ties with Indonesia suit both Australia and India and is a favoured option. The second is the India–Japan–Australia triad. Indo-Japan relations have benefited from the Modi–Abe personal equation. In the Asia-Pacific, India's relations with Japan will be more important than with Australia. Meanwhile, Australia is also becoming closer to Japan.

To conclude, PM Modi's Act East agenda is an ambitious one and may work well with Australia's Indo-Pacific idea and one of the incidental implications of this policy may be to offset China's growing power.²⁵

NOTES

1. Euan Graham, 'Australia's "Forward" Defense White Paper', *The Diplomat*, 3 March 2016, available at <http://the-diplomat.com/2016/03/australias-forward-defense-white-paper/>, accessed on 10 March 2016.
2. Peter Stanley, 'Indians, Anzacs and Gallipoli, 1915', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, July–September 2014, p. 30.
3. Indian and Australian navies have engaged during Exercise Malabar in 2007 and in anti-piracy operations in Gulf of Aden. See Abhijit Singh, 'Modi's Australia Visit: Maritime Cooperation in Focus', *IDSAC Comment*, 13 November 2013. http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ModisAustraliaivisitMaritimeCooperation_asingh_131114, accessed on 13 February 2016.
4. For the Joint Statement see Press Information Bureau, Government of India website at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/mbErel.aspx?relid=96436>, dated 05 June 2013. Accessed on 4 February 2016 and Minister for Defence and India's Minister of Defence – Joint Statement – Visit of A. K. Antony,

- Defence Minister of India, to Australia 4-5 June 2013, available at <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 on 4 February 2016.
5. Euan Graham, , 'Australia's "Forward" Defense White Paper', n.1.
 6. Minister for Defence and India's Minister of Defence, – Joint Statement – Visit of A.K. Antony, Defence Minister of India, to Australia 4-5 June 2013.
 7. 2016 Defence White Paper, Department of Defence, Australia, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>, p. 134, accessed on 25 March 2016.
 8. Australia sends two officers every year to Indian military educational institutions, that is, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and National Defence College, Delhi. In return, India sends two officers every year to Australia's Command and Staff College and Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies.
 9. Other major powers, including the US and Chinese navies, also participated, with the Chinese sending two Type 054A Jiangkai-II-class frigates, the *PLAN Liuzhou* and *PLAN Sanya*.
 10. Fumio Kishida [Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan], 'Special Partnership for the Era of the Indo-Pacific', Fifteenth Sapru House Lecture', 17 January 2015, available at <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/stmtdg/2014/fmjapan17012015.pdf>, accessed on 15 February 2016
 11. Prashanth Parameswaran, 'Australia, India to Hold First Ever Naval Exercise Amid China Concerns', *The Diplomat*, 1, September 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/australia-india-to-hold-first-ever-naval-exercise-amid-china-concerns/>, accessed on 1 February 2016.
 12. Abhijit Singh, 'Malabar-2015 and Power Dynamics in the Asian Commons', IDSA Comment, 23 October 2015, available at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Malabar2015andPowerDynamicsintheAsianCommons_asingh_231015, accessed on 23 February 2016.
 13. 2016 Defence White Paper, Department of Defence, Australia, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>, p. 135, accessed on 25 March 2016.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 62
 15. See response to Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2092, answered on 17 December 2015, available at Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) website: <http://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/26207/Q+NO2092+NUCLEAR+AGREEMENT+WITH+AUSTRALIA>, accessed on 18 January 2016.

16. 2016 Defence White Paper, Department of Defence, Australia, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>, p.62, ccessed on 25 March 2016
17. Ibid., p. 121,
18. Ibid. p.134
19. Ibid.
20. 'Defence White Paper 2016: Eight Strategic Observations', *The Interpreter*, 29 February 2016, available at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/02/29/Defence-White-Paper-2016-Eight-strategic-observations.aspx>, accessed on 15 March 2016.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. 'China's Defence White Paper is Historic for Australia, and Not in a Good Way', *The Interpreter*, 3 June 2015, available at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/06/03/Chinas-defence-white-paper-is-historic-for-Australia-and-not-in-a-good-way.aspx>, accessed on 4 February 2016
24. See the website of the High Commission of India in Australia, available at <http://www.hcindia-au.org/india-australia.htm>, accessed on 20 March 2016.
25. Rory Medcalf and Danielle Rajendram, 'India's Narendra Modi is Good News for Australia', *The Age*, 20 May 2014, available at <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/indias-narendra-modi-is-good-news-for-australia-20140519-zrhdd.html>, accessed on 15 February 2016.

APPENDIX

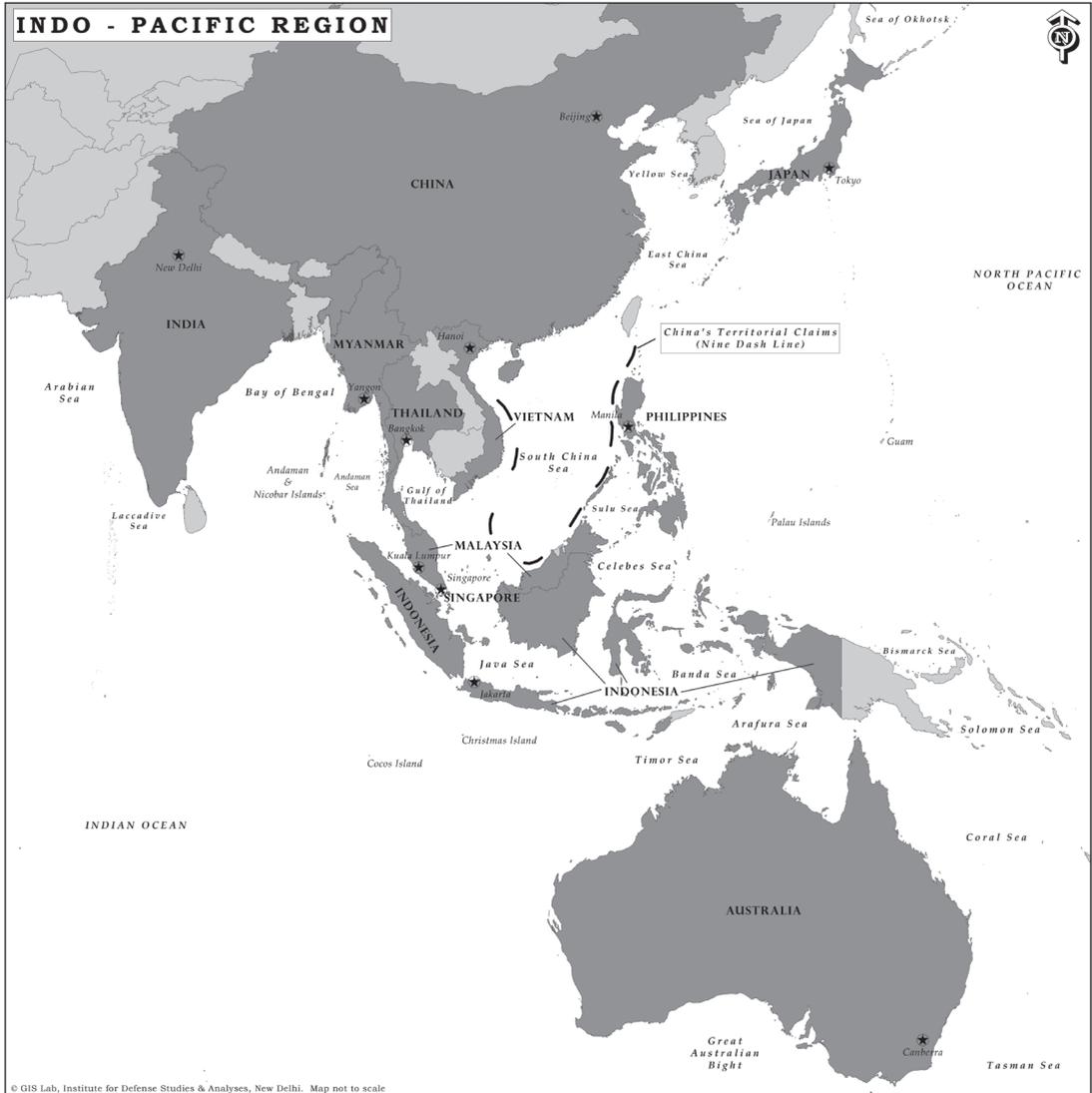


Figure I The Indo-Pacific Region