

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

Southern Indo-Pacific Outreach: PM Modi's Visits to Australia and New Zealand

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July 16, 2026

Summary

Prime Minister Modi's visits to Australia and New Zealand follow a successful visit by Japan's Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, to India from 1 July to 3 July, and PM Modi's visit to Indonesia from 6 July to 8 July. Sustained political commitment and effective implementation are required to translate these partnerships into enduring pillars of India's Indo-Pacific vision.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits to Australia and New Zealand from 8 July to 11 July 2026 mark a significant milestone in India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific. They represent an effort to consolidate India's strategic presence in the Southern Indo-Pacific, a region that is central to global geopolitics, maritime security and supply-chain resilience. India's Indo-Pacific vision has evolved towards a more expansive maritime strategy that stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands. Efforts like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) launched by India in 2019 to ensure a secure and sustainable maritime domain, engagement with ASEAN, Quad and outreach to the island nations demonstrate India's ambition to become a leading stakeholder in shaping the regional order.

India's foreign policy, with changing geopolitical realities, has adopted a broader conception of its strategic environment. India's Indo-Pacific vision extends beyond the eastern Indian Ocean to include Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Island countries. It is widely acknowledged that developments across interconnected maritime spaces have direct implications for India's maritime security, economic prosperity and overall strategic interests. More than 90 per cent of India's trade and its energy imports are transported through these maritime routes, including the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific waters.¹

The timing of PM Modi's visits to Australia and New Zealand is also significant, as they follow a successful visit by Japan's Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, to India from 1 July to 3 July and PM Modi's visit to Indonesia from 6 July to 8 July. The Indo-Pacific region continues to witness intensified great-power competition, contested maritime spaces and supply-chain disruptions. Countries across the region are also seeking to diversify their strategic and economic partnerships. For India, Australia and New Zealand are seen as vital partners within this strategic landscape. Australia has become a key pillar of India's defence, security and critical minerals partnership, and New Zealand offers opportunities in trade, education and for furthering India's engagement with Pacific Island countries.

Australia: India's Strategic Partner

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Australia from 8 July to 9 July for the Third India–Australia Annual Summit.² India–Australia ties have undergone a

¹ Sohini Bose and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, [“India and a Stable Indo-Pacific: Managing Maritime Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal”](#), Occasional Paper No. 432, Observer Research Foundation, 27 March 2024.

² [“Third India-Australia Annual Summit Joint Statement”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 9 July 2026.

remarkable transformation from a partnership driven by trade and educational exchanges to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership focusing on defence, maritime security, critical minerals and technology. This summit further reiterated these areas of cooperation, reflecting the convergence of strategic interests between two Indo-Pacific democracies.

Strengthening Defence and Security Cooperation

Defence cooperation emerged as one of the key outcomes and a defining pillar of India–Australia ties. The annual summit produced a new Joint Declaration on Defence and Security Cooperation, which follows the 2009 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.³ Both countries view the Indo-Pacific as an interconnected strategic theatre where maintaining maritime stability requires cooperation among like-minded countries. The new declaration emphasises operational integration, strengthening interoperability through joint exercises and long-term defence collaboration.

Maritime security is central to their cooperation since both countries depend on secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC). India and Australia have committed to further strengthening the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) through coordinated surveillance and information sharing across the Indo-Pacific region. For Australia, India is a resident power in the Indian Ocean capable of contributing to regional stability. The summit also focused on the potential for cooperation in anti-submarine warfare and coordinated patrols.

Improved MDA and intelligence-sharing would also enable both navies to monitor developments across the eastern Indian Ocean. Bilateral naval exercises like AUSINDEX have evolved into a platform for maritime surveillance and coordinated naval operations. Australia is a key democratic country in the Quad, and its continued participation in the Malabar Exercise, alongside India, Japan and the United States, has strengthened interoperability among Quad member countries, further showcasing operational convergence.⁴

A key highlight of the summit regarding defence cooperation was their partnership in defence industrial cooperation. Both India and Australia have recognised the necessity of developing resilient defence supply chains and reducing dependence on single sources for critical technologies. Key areas identified for cooperation include artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, shipbuilding, unmanned

³ Ibid.

⁴ Commander Phil Johnston, “[Converging Currents: A Case for Enhanced Australia-India-US Maritime Intelligence Sharing and Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean](#)”, United States Studies Centre, 1 July 2025.

systems and cybersecurity that also closely align with India's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative. It will further complement Australia's ambitions to strengthen its defence industrial base.

The expanding defence cooperation between the two countries reflects that the Indo-Pacific requires stronger partnerships to preserve a rules-based order. In April 2026, Japan and Australia signed a deal for Mogami-class frigates, a historic moment for their defence ties. Japan has also offered to co-produce and co-develop Mogami-class frigates with India.⁵ This also implies greater potential for defence-industrial cooperation among Indo-Pacific countries, particularly Quad member countries.

Economic and Energy Security

Economic ties and security have also been an important driver of bilateral relations between the two countries. The Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) between India and Australia has been operational since 2022 and has accelerated bilateral trade and investment.⁶ India's total trade with Australia stood at US\$ 21.1 billion in FY 2025–2026.⁷ Both governments will also work towards concluding a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), which could deepen economic integration and provide further opportunities for investment and technology collaboration. Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese called the Indian leader a living bridge between both countries, stating that Modi's vision had helped reshape the roadmap for Australia's economic ties with India.⁸

Furthermore, the transition towards clean energy technologies and advanced manufacturing has increased global demand for critical minerals such as lithium, nickel and rare-earth elements. Australia possesses some of the world's largest mineral reserves, and India seeks reliable access to these resources to support the renewable energy transition and manufacturing expansion. Therefore, through these complementarities, both countries prioritise cooperation across the critical minerals chain, right from exploration to processing, refining and manufacturing. This would strengthen India's industrial capabilities and build resilient supply chains.

Importantly, Australia has also agreed to supply uranium for India's civil nuclear programme and expand energy cooperation and has signed a uranium exports

⁵ Grant Wyeth, “[Australia-Japan Ink Deal for Mogami-class Frigates](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2026.

⁶ “[India-Australia ECTA Completes Four Years, Strengthening Bilateral Economic Partnership](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, 2 April 2026.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Melanie Burton and Hritam Mukherjee, “[Australia-India Strike Deal on Uranium Exports during Modi Visit](#)”, *Reuters*, 9 July 2026.

agreement. This agreement allows Australia to export uranium to India for peaceful uses, which would reinforce the strategic partnership between the two countries and help India develop nuclear power plants. For Australia, the deal would contribute to increasing the share of non-fossil fuel power generation while simultaneously creating new market opportunities for its resource sector.

Uranium exports to India were first envisioned under the 2015 civil nuclear agreement but failed to gain real traction. What has changed is the global energy supply disruptions, especially amid the Middle East conflict and the Strait of Hormuz crisis, which now make energy security a vital aspect of cooperation. India has been eyeing Australia's uranium reserves to meet the target of 100 gigawatts of nuclear energy capacity by 2047, and Australia wants to diversify its trade and reduce reliance on China.⁹

Beyond defence and economic security, leaders of both countries focused on strengthening education and people-to-people ties and finalised approvals for Australian universities to open their campuses in India, such as Flinders University and Victoria University.¹⁰ India–Australia ties have entered a new phase, dominated by sustained convergence in defence collaboration, resilient supply chains, and maritime security as mutually reinforcing pillars of the partnership. Given the intensification of great-power competition, Australia is likely to remain India's consequential strategic partner. The challenge now lies in effectively implementing existing commitments, expanding defence-industrial cooperation, and translating convergences into strategic outcomes.

New Zealand: A Strategic Partnership in the South Pacific

Following PM Modi's visit to Australia, he visited New Zealand, marking the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 40 years. The evolving geopolitical and economic landscape has strengthened Wellington's importance as a partner in trade, technology and climate action. PM Narendra Modi's summit meeting with his counterpart, Christopher Luxon, resulted in 18 agreements and announcements. The core of the new partnership is the 'Roadmap to 2030', which is a four-year plan to guide cooperation across defence, maritime security, trade, sports and people-to-people exchanges.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ [“Third India-Australia Annual Summit Joint Statement”](#), no. 2.

¹¹ [“India-New Zealand Strategic Partnership: Roadmap to 2030”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 July 2026.

Trade is one of the major priorities for both countries as they have committed to doubling bilateral trade to NZ\$ 7 billion (35,000 crores) by 2030.¹² The Free Trade Agreement signed in April 2026 between the two countries is a breakthrough after years of negotiations. It is expected to facilitate greater market access, reduce tariff barriers, and increase investment across various sectors.¹³ Once the FTA is implemented, New Zealand will provide duty-free access to Indian exports. The FTA also complements New Zealand's intention to diversify trade partnerships and integrate into resilient supply chains.

For New Zealand, India is one of the fastest-growing economies and a viable investment destination. Therefore, increasing complementarities between India's consumer market and New Zealand's strengths in agricultural technology and renewable energy could create scope for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Another noteworthy area highlighted during this visit is the advancement of defence cooperation between the two countries. India and New Zealand concluded a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement for reciprocal logistical assistance between the New Zealand Defence Force and the Indian Navy, including refuelling and maintenance.¹⁴ Both countries also focused on maritime cooperation and information sharing across the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, as part of India's IPOI, New Zealand announced it would lead the Maritime Security Pillar with an emphasis on combating illegal fishing.¹⁵

New Zealand also values India for its engagement with Pacific Island countries, as Wellington has been one of the region's principal development partners. Beyond defence and economic aspects, both countries also agreed to cooperate on earthquake resilience measures and disaster preparedness, and to enhance further people-to-people ties by boosting tourism and expanding their collaboration in sports.

While defence cooperation with New Zealand has remained modest as compared to India's partnership with Australia, both countries support a free and open Indo-Pacific region. PM Modi's visit to New Zealand and the elevation of their ties from a conventional bilateral partnership to a strategic partnership have come amid growing great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. For New Zealand, the partnership supports efforts to diversify strategic partnerships further. New

¹² Ibid.

¹³ [“India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement Signed”](#), Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 27 April 2026.

¹⁴ [“India-New Zealand Strategic Partnership: Roadmap to 2030”](#), no. 11.

¹⁵ Girish Luthra, [“As It Completes Five Years, It's Time to Take the IPOI to the Next Level”](#), Observer Research Foundation, 9 September 2024.

Zealand has emphasised diplomacy and development cooperation, and these priorities complement India's preference for strategic autonomy and issue-based partnerships.

Implications for India's Indo-Pacific Vision

Prime Minister Modi's visits to Australia and New Zealand reaffirm India's commitment to strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries and contribute to a stable and secure Indo-Pacific region. The visit further reflects India's strategic recalibration towards the Southern Indo-Pacific, a region emerging as a crucial theatre of great-power competition, maritime connectivity and economic resilience.

Deepening engagement with Australia and New Zealand reinforces the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific through expanding cooperation in maritime security, defence-industrial collaboration, resilient supply chains and critical technologies. Australia's strategic location connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, along with New Zealand's engagement with Pacific Island countries, allows India to strengthen its presence across the wider Indo-Pacific maritime space.

What is also significant from these visits is the growing importance of economic security for India. Cooperation with Australia in critical minerals and advanced manufacturing supports India's ambitions of becoming a manufacturing hub under its 'Make in India' initiative, while New Zealand offers opportunities to diversify trade and strengthen agricultural innovation. These partnerships may reduce India's dependence on supply chains while enabling deeper integration into Indo-Pacific economic networks.

Challenges and Way Forward

Numerous mechanisms, agreements and dialogues have produced valuable outcomes regarding India's external partnerships. However, timely execution and sustained follow-up are vital. Furthermore, the effective implementation of the India-New Zealand FTA and improved connectivity would determine whether economic cooperation can match the ambitions. The intensifying geopolitical competition across the Indo-Pacific region may further complicate regional diplomacy. India will need to continue balancing its partnerships along with its commitment to an inclusive regional order that avoids bloc politics. Moreover, to sustain the momentum generated by these visits, India should focus on

institutionalising regular high-level strategic dialogues with both countries and on ensuring greater coordination across defence, trade and technology.

With Australia, the priority should be on operationalising defence-industrial cooperation, expanding joint research on critical technologies, and developing resilient supply chains for critical minerals. With New Zealand, India should focus on maximising the benefits of the FTA and promoting cooperation in food security and digital innovation. India should also focus on fostering synergy between bilateral partnerships and regional mechanisms such as the Quad and IPOI, as this would enable India to project itself as a comprehensive partner capable of delivering regional goods and strengthening inclusive regional governance.

India's partnerships with Australia and New Zealand reflect the recognition that the future of the Indo-Pacific requires resilient supply chains, maritime connectivity and technological innovation. India's engagement with these two countries, therefore, demonstrates a multi-dimensional foreign policy that balances strategic interests with inclusive regional cooperation. Sustained political commitment and effective implementation will determine whether these partnerships can become enduring pillars of India's Indo-Pacific vision.

About the Author



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