

The challenges of building an Australia-India-US partnership in the Indo-Pacific by David Brewster

David Brewster (dhbrewster@bigpond.com) is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Security College, Canberra, where he works on Indian and Indian Ocean affairs, and India-China strategic competition, especially in the maritime domain.

The rise of Asia's two giants, China and India, is forcing Australia to re-examine its understanding of the regional order that has existed since the end of World War II. In recent years there has been much debate in Australia about its choices with a rising China, but far less about the consequences of India's emergence.

India is becoming an ever more important regional partner for both Australia and the United States. While there have been many positive developments in the Australia-India and US-India strategic relationships, they still operate as separate bilateral relationships. The next step is to operationalize these relationships and bring them together into a trilateral security partnership with a primary focus on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. This will require both Australia and the United States to act outside their normal comfort zones in working with friends and allies.

A new report by Australia's US Studies Centre, [*Australia, India and the United States: the challenge of forging new alignments in the Indo-Pacific*](#), looks at the challenges and choices faced by the United States and Australia in building their strategic relationships with India, and how they could better coordinate these relationships with the ANZUS alliance.

Since the turn of this century, the United States has actively tried to engage with Delhi, primarily to help it become a regional balance to China. This has not always been an easy task and progress has often been glacial. Putting aside the various political and economic irritations, one of the biggest challenges in developing a security relationship is India's attachment to 'strategic autonomy' – the idea that India should never need to rely upon other countries. This catchphrase has become a mantra among Indian strategists and decision-makers even if there is little thought as to what it actually means.

Some might consider India's quest for strategic autonomy as quixotic in a globalized world where coalitions and cooperation are the norm even for the biggest of powers. Certainly from an Australian perspective, a goal of strategic autonomy makes about as much sense as a goal of economic autarchy. But India's antipathy toward foreign alliances can be compared with the US aversion to 'foreign entanglements' that was core to its strategy for some 150 years while the United States built its national power.

What strategic autonomy means and how it can be achieved is the subject of greater debate in India. Modernists increasingly appreciate the necessity of security relationships with others, and the leverage that such relationships give to India. India's thinking about strategic autonomy is likely to evolve as it moves beyond defensiveness to play a greater role in managing the international system. This will almost inevitably require India to be much more strategically interconnected than in the past, exerting influence via cooperation rather than in spite of it. But the dream of 'strategic autonomy' – whatever that may be – is likely to remain both a talisman and a brake on India's strategic relationships for a long time.

Another challenge in developing a working security partnership with India – particularly one focused on the Indian Ocean region – is India's proprietary view toward the Indian Ocean and its aspirations for regional leadership. Many have argued that India would like to institute its own Monroe Doctrine in the Indian Ocean, just as the United States did in its own region many years ago. If it is not official policy in Delhi, then this aspiration certainly informs India's reactions to the presence of other extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. India may see value in the current US military presence in the Indian Ocean, particularly in countering China, but it is only in the belief that the United States will eventually withdraw from the region.

A third challenge arises from the ever evolving views in Delhi, Canberra, and Washington about how to calibrate their relationships with China: how to respond to China's assertiveness without creating a security dilemma. These differences were behind the collapse of the proposed 2007 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), which would have brought together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in some sort of undefined coalition. Canberra walked away from the QSD and Delhi walked away from the related multilateral *Malabar* naval exercises, in both cases from fear of unduly provoking China. Both India and Australia remain more cautious than the United States about how to respond to China, in part reflecting their physical proximity to these problems. However, recent developments in the South China Sea (for Canberra) and China's growing presence in Pakistan (for Delhi), are bringing them into closer convergence. Nevertheless, the challenge remains as how to deter Beijing without creating a security dilemma; how to operationalize the relationships in ways that are not explicitly directed at China. The three countries need to strengthen their relationships without excluding China.

Despite these considerable constraints, there has been a sea-change in the US-India security relationship over the last 18 months. Seemingly spurred by China's assertiveness in South Asia, the South China Sea, and elsewhere, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has concluded that India must be

willing to move past some of its traditional Nehruvian certainties. India-US defense interactions have become increasingly intense, including exercises, training and transfers of high end defense technology. The recent finalization of the LEMOA agreement giving the Indian and US militaries access to each other's facilities represents a major practical and symbolic step for India, even if such agreements may seem unremarkable in Washington.

India's role as a regional balancer is also a big factor for Australia, and Canberra too has been knocking at Delhi's door for more than a decade. Canberra's calculus on India is a little different to Washington's, but not inconsistent. Australia has long benefited from the US-led regional order in Asia and would like to see it continue, but we can be sure that it won't last forever. If Australia is likely to face a more multipolar region over the long term then a close relationship with a strong, friendly, and democratic India is a necessity. Australia and India also share a host of security concerns in the unstable and poorly governed Indian Ocean that need to be managed together. India may never become a formal ally, but in the long term it might join countries like Japan to become one of Australia's most important Indo-Pacific security partners.

There are now many regular bilateral defense and security dialogues between Australia and India to discuss shared interests, but only recently have these begun to be translated into more substantive cooperation. Bilateral naval exercises held in the Bay of Bengal in 2015 were a first step but the naval relationship needs to be broadened. Cooperation among the other armed forces is at a lower level. The growing number of shared platforms potentially creates significant opportunities for cooperation among the two air forces. There are also potential areas of cooperation between the two armies, including between special forces. But in reality there is very little operational cooperation, let alone interoperability.

Australia must play an active role in molding the relationship and promoting India's regional role in the Indian Ocean as a complement to that of the United States. Despite hesitations (in both Delhi and Canberra), Australia should press to participate in the *Malabar* naval exercises alongside the US, Indian, and Japanese navies. Australia should also press for a regular Australia-India-US trilateral dialogue. This should be part of a broader goal of building a trilateral defense and security partnership with India and the United States with a primary focus on the Indian Ocean, the theater where the interests of the three countries most clearly intersect.

Much of the focus needs to be on building practical cooperation among defense forces, which may sometimes require Australia to move outside its comfort zone in defense cooperation. This should include:

- Finding opportunities for all the services from the three countries to exercise together, whether or not as part of formal trilateral exercises.
- Using Australia's Maritime Border Command (its quasi-coast guard) as a lead agency in working with India's Coast Guard to build capacity throughout the eastern Indian Ocean.

- Working with India and the United States to build a shared system of maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean. This could involve shared access to facilities such as Australia's Cocos Island. The new 'White Shipping' information sharing agreements with India need to be implemented and then extended.
- Investigating the potential for a cooperative maritime domain awareness system covering Southeast Asia, in conjunction with key regional partners such as Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia.
- Encouraging India to use training facilities in northern Australia as part of a strategy of promoting greater interoperability with India as well as between India and Australia's regional partners.

Building a good strategic relationship with India will be a long and challenging process. But Australia must take the lead in creating a strong partnership with India that complements its core alliance with the United States.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.