

# Why New Delhi welcomes a can-do Canberra

*The establishment of a transparent, sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship between the two liberal democracies is key to sustaining the free and open regional order*

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**O**ver the last few years, the emerging closeness between India and Australia has often made news, but such enthusiasm has been, at times, short-lived. However, with the Indo-Pacific in flux—results of China's growing assertiveness as well as uncertainty about American leadership—middle and emerging powers in the region find themselves contemplating the need to join hands. Australia and India are not exceptions in this regard. Moreover, the rebirth of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (commonly known as the Quad) in November last year and the importance given to India in the 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper, provide an even broader canvas for a sustainable, upward trajectory in India-Australia relations.

Historically, a key problem with Australia's bilateral relationships has been the fundamental dichotomy of its foreign policy, to wit, the misalignment of Australia's economic and political-security interests. While Australia is reliant on the US for its defence and security through the Australia-New Zealand-US treaty, its economy depends on China, which accounts for the lion's share of bilateral trade and investment Down Under. This translates into hard choices for Australia, an issue that has gained prominence in the eyes of many international observers. In particular, Australia's deep economic ties with China in the last two decades has led many Indians to question its strategic intent and ability when it comes to standing up to the Dragon.

However, much has changed over the past year. Australia is gradually coming to terms with the risks of having an assertive China that has meddled in the domestic politics of other countries. It was recently rocked by a scandal involving a senator who was accused of doing Beijing's bidding on the South China Sea issue in parliament, going against his own party's position. Since the controversy surfaced, there were further revelations of alleged Chinese interference in Australian politics through Chinese government-backed manipulation of public opinion. With the Australian government banning its department of defence employees from downloading WeChat (a Chinese messaging app) on their work phones, it is safe to say that relations between China and Australia are at an all-time low.

The latest Australian Foreign Policy White Paper's exhortation of a free and open rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is a tacit acknowledgement of the changed geopolitical realities of the region. While, in that document, Australia acknowledged the strength of its relationship with China, it also affirmed its responsibility to ensure that all regional players follow the rulebook when it comes to maintaining the extant arrangements in the region. Canberra's support for a coalition of "like-minded democracies" and invocation of the importance of creating better ties with India are indications of its institutional stance. Indeed, the White Paper went so far as to put India within "the front ranks of Australia's international partnerships".

At present, the India-Australia relationship faces traditional bottlenecks that have persisted for quite some time. They have been principally around a long-overdue Free Trade Agreement, as well as differences around visas and other immigration issues. India also, pointedly, refused to let Australia participate in the 2017 US-India-Japan Malabar naval exercises last year. However, given the larger political and strategic context, one hopes that both sides realize that there is nothing to be achieved from squabbling over each difference. Such issues can and should be put on the backburner, and not be allowed to detract from the real benefits of cooperation and partnership between the two regional behemoths.

Like in Australia, in India too there is a growing wariness around President Donald Trump's vacillations on China. There is a perceptible fear in New Delhi of the prospect that Trump's "deal-making" temperament could lead to an American quid-pro-quo arrangement with the Chinese. This would be detrimental to Indian national and regional interests. Therefore, in the pursuit of strategic autonomy—the holy grail of India's foreign policy—the logical course of action for India would be to diversify its security partners,



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and enter into bilateral and trilateral defence arrangements to augment its existing strategic reach and capability. A solid partnership with Australia should figure prominently in this context. Although India does hold a bilateral naval exercise, AUSINDEX, with Australia, it is nowhere close to the Malabar exercise in terms of its scale and depth. Allowing Australia to join this year's edition would go a long way in strengthening bilateral relations as well laying the foundations of a strong Quad.

Looking into the future, the trajectory of Australia-India relations depends on a combination of internal and external circumstances for both countries. Externally, both India and Australia have their individual worries when it comes to China. India does not want to incur Beijing's wrath yet again coming on the heels of the Doklam standoff last year, but at the same time seeks the right balance of restraint and resolve. Australia, which would continue to be economically dependent on China in the near future, is also cautious of its interests in preserving a liberal strategic environment while avoiding antagonizing Beijing overtly.

Internally, Australia needs to find the balance of bipartisan support for its foreign policy and commitment towards bettering relations with India. For example, it was widely held that the Labour Party is not as enthusiastic on the Quad as the incumbent Liberal National Coalition. However, recent statements made by the shadow foreign minister, Penny Wong, in support of the grouping as well as the importance of India, offer hope for continued momentum in advancing the course of bilateral relations. In the end, the establishment of a transparent, sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship between the two liberal democracies is the key component in sustaining the free and open regional order. Canberra's recent institutional reaffirmation of this point has been warmly welcomed in New Delhi.

*Comments are welcome at [theirview@livemint.com](mailto:theirview@livemint.com)*