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MODI-FYING INDIA-AUSTRALIA TIES

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New approaches and shifts now are inescapable and Australia too looks at India to herald a new era in bilateral cooperation. Under the Modi Government now, New Delhi will have to move beyond the tried and tested idealism-pragmatism conundrum, which had hitherto plagued the UPA's foreign policy

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the India-Australia relationship stands at the cusp of a historic opportunity. India under Narendra Modi and Australia under Tony Abbott have a tremendous opportunity to take the ties to a higher level. The BJP Government must build upon the upward trajectory witnessed in bilateral ties since 2009 when it was upgraded to strategic partnership. The sole sticking point, the supply of

uranium, has already been done away with by the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the Indian students' issue, which once jolted bilateral ties, has been addressed effectively. With subsequent tightening of the visa rules and crackdown on the dubious institutions and students immigration agents on both ends, the number of Indian students interested in pursuing higher degree programmes in universities has now surged to over 4,000 in 2013, marking a 7.3 per cent increase in visa lodgements from previous years.

Their future cooperation would receive added nourishment from the fact that in the wake of the 2002 Gujarat riots, when the Narendra Modi Government was being castigated from the US and Europe, Australia chose not to. It has never denied Modi entry into Australia. At the invitation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, he visited Australia in 2001 and 2004. The current Australian High Commissioner Patrick Suckling has been carrying on with the past engagements with the Gujarat Government and has already extended an invitation to Narendra Modi to visit Australia which will materialise during the G-20 Summit in November in Brisbane. He will break New Delhi's self-imposed restriction on a prime ministerial visit since 1986.

The scene is ideally set for India-Australia relations to realise its full potential. Australia's long-term interests in the Asian century have now become the mainstay of its national security and defence policies which overlap with the India-Australia strategic interests. India is no more a 'blind spot' in the Australian foreign policy. Several recent Government reports including Dr Ken Henry's January 2013 report entitled, 'Australia in the Asian Century White Paper 2012' have delved deeply into the shaping of the Asian century and expanding the strategic net to include other regions and influential states such as India and Indonesia, and the growing US presence in the region, now labelled as the Indo-Pacific.

Encouragingly, the paper considers policy-making not as a purely Government-task (leaders, diplomats and bureaucrats), but a joint exercise involving academics, scholars, artists, analysts and institutions that possess the knowledge and expertise on the region and regional matters. This multi-track approach also complements India's foreign policy approach, thereby expanding the space for cooperation at various levels.

Australia reckons that the emergence of Asia, buttressed by the rise of India and China, is laden with enormous opportunities for it to augment its presence in the region and engage with them. The priority therefore, for Canberra is to envisage a clear plan to seize the economic opportunities, but in the process also manage the policy choices that will have to be made in engaging both New Delhi and Beijing, simultaneously. There is this understanding in Canberra that the broader international interests of India and China could potentially impact on the established strategic order in Asia and would witness their enhanced defence and industrial capabilities. Herein, what is not lost to both Canberra and New Delhi is that they would not like to jeopardise their relations with Beijing, and therefore, prefer building ties in a manner that does not appear directed at China.

Undoubtedly, in the Australian foreign policy calculus deepening ties with India are now accorded a high priority to maximise the dividends. Australia seeks to broaden and deepen its understanding of the Asian cultures and languages, to make itself more Asian literate to understand and engage better. In schools, it is proposed, that students be encouraged to learn Asian languages, including Hindi.

In the unfolding Asian century, India-Australia bilateral relations are expected to converge in four key spheres.

First, in the national security sphere in which Australia would require to respond to the overall altering strategic situation underpinned by the contestations between the US and China and growing Indian role in the Indo-Pacific. And India would continue building relations with regional states such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Japan, with a conflictual history with China, to counter China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. Growing Indian global and Asian engagements, including a strong presence in South Asia, South East Asia and the Indo-Pacific can be built further on the 2009 strategic partnership which is underpinned by a joint declaration in security cooperation to address transnational challenges such as maritime piracy, terrorism, people-smuggling, money laundering, cyber space security, non-proliferation and natural disasters.

Second, in the maritime space, they have been participating in joint naval exercises, 'Milan', which was initiated in 1995, in the Andaman and Nicobar region. In 2014, besides Australia, a number of countries participated including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Thailand. Their maritime cooperation along with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean is also facilitated through a multitude of engagements such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. They have a common stake in keeping the Indian Ocean, East Asian and Pacific waters secure due to their dependence on the energy trade through these waters. In this regard, the Indian Navy's long-running patrolling of the Malacca Straits is duly acknowledged by Australia. Both sides are now also cooperating under the Trilateral Dialogue on Indian Ocean (TDIO), along with Indonesia to deal with Natural disaster and sea-borne threats which may also work as a confidence building measure between Australia and Indonesia, given their growing mistrust over the phone tapping scandal.

Third, in the collective security sphere India and Australia share a common understanding in strengthening regional security mechanisms through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and in the global institutions to strengthen the writ of international law. Both have been holding dialogues under the rubric of ASEAN, ARF and East Asia Summit to address regional challenges. They also periodically cooperate under the ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting Plus dialogue which also brings China, regional states and the United States on a common platform to address regional issues.

And fourth, in the internal security sphere, both nations have suffered at the hands of terrorism. More than 100 Australians have been killed in terrorist strikes the world over and Australia faces threats inside its borders too. A number of terrorist plots have been foiled within Australia leading to the prosecution of 35 people for terrorism offences. Over 40 people have lost their passports and have been rejected for attaining passports due to terrorism reasons. On the other hand, India has been waging its own bloody battle with terrorism since the 1980s in which over 60,000 lives have been lost. The creation of the Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism has a comprehensive mandate aimed at buttressing cooperation between the security and intelligence agencies of India and Australia. It aims to strengthen India's counter-terrorism and policing efforts and augment Australia understands and handling of Islamic terrorism and radicalisation based on the Indian experience. The Australia Federal Police (AFP) already has an office in New Delhi since 2010 to strengthen law enforcement relationship with India.

As Australia looks at India to herald a new era in bilateral cooperation under the Modi Government, New Delhi will have to resolve the idealism-pragmatism conundrum that once plagued the UPA foreign policy, causing frequent course correction with the US, Iran, Sri Lanka and others, projecting it as an untrustworthy partner. And also, avoiding any debate on its nuclear doctrine, such as the one recently triggered over the 'no first use policy'. Both sides do not want to retract to 1998.