

INDIA-AUSTRALIA DEFENCE RELATIONS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Image Source: Anadolu Agency ¹

Introduction

In the contemporary world, India and Australia are two important states which are increasingly enhancing their bilateral relations, especially in the realm of defence and strategy. Currently, India has the defence budget of almost 80 billion USD,² whereas Australia is spending around 35 billion USD on defence.³ Since 2006, India and Australia have signed and established consensus on more than 7 strategic and defence related arrangements which are worth probing. These include the Memorandum on Defence Cooperation in 2006, Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2009, Bilateral Framework for Security Cooperation in 2014, Secretaries 2+2 Dialogue upgraded to Ministerial Level in 2020, Mutual Logistics Support Agreement in 2020, and Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement in 2020.⁴

¹ Cheena Kapoor, 'India, Australia Open up Military Bases amid China Row', *Anadolu Agency*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-india-australia-open-up-military-bases-amid-china-row/1866258>.

² Diego Lopes da Silva et al., 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2021', *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/fs_2204_milex_2021_0.pdf.

³ *The Military Balance 2022* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218–20.

Besides the aforementioned agreements, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad is the most important that was established in 2007 which is a four-country platform including Australia, United States, Japan, and India. The latter was discontinued in 2008 citing the Chinese “diplomatic pressure” of a renewed containment.⁵ However, the Quad was resuscitated in 2017 which is now a considerable policy platform to deliberate issues related to “defence, including pandemic mitigation, cyber and climate change.”⁶ Nonetheless, Quad’s current outlook and formation depicts more of a strategic platform that could grow into a military alliance. The latter sounds an ambitious argument, however, let us study the defence relations between India and Australia – two Quad members – to understand it more.

- 1. Memorandum on Defence Cooperation (2006)**
- 2. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad (2007)**
- 3. Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (2009)**
- 4. Bilateral Framework for Security Cooperation (2014)**
- 5. Secretaries 2+2 Dialogue upgraded to Ministerial Level (2020)**
- 6. Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (2020)**
- 7. Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement (2020)**
- 8. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2020)**

Figure 1: The timeline of bilateral agreements between India and Australia.⁷

In 2020, the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed back in 2009, was upgraded to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the growing strategic relations between India and Australia (Figure 2).⁸

⁵ Ibid., 226.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ‘Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia’, *Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-statement-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-between-republic-india-and-australia>.

⁸ ‘Narendra Modi’, *Twitter*, 4 June 2020, <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1268436008200175617>.



Figure 2: PM Modi's tweet lauding the new agreement.⁹

India and Australia in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific

India and the United States started the annual Malabar Naval Exercises in 1992, which later expanded in 2007 with the inclusion of Australia, Japan, and Singapore.¹⁰ In other words, the establishment of the Quad in 2007 provided a common platform to share naval expertise and brought the navies of India and Australia closer to each other. Currently, the navies of India and Australia are working closely to achieve interoperability in terms of operations and communications.

India has a considerable presence in the Indian Ocean and due to its strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it has proximity to the West Pacific. Also, it is worthy to note here that India established a Tri-Forces Command at the islands, which means that Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force have operational bases at the islands. As a matter of fact, this is how India rhetorically connects itself with the Pacific and the term Indo-Pacific is the product of such rhetoric. On the other hand, Australia has a huge geography and is the largest concentrated landmass in the Pacific Ocean. Naturally, Australia needs a strong navy to protect its shores and to project power beyond its coastline. It is worth mentioning that Australia has the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean which could act as a strategic location (Figure 3).¹¹ By the virtue of their bilateral defence agreements and provisions, both nations could use Cocos Islands (Australia) and Andaman and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Brewster, 'The India-Australia Security and Defence Relationship: Developments, Constraints and Prospects', *Security Challenges* 10, no. 1 (2014): 76.

¹¹ 'Cocos (Keeling) Islands', *Google Maps*, 26 September 2022, [https://www.google.com/maps/place/Cocos+\(Keeling\)+Islands/](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Cocos+(Keeling)+Islands/).

Nicobar Islands (India) for military purposes.¹² However, the details of such provisions are not clear and are supposedly kept vague.

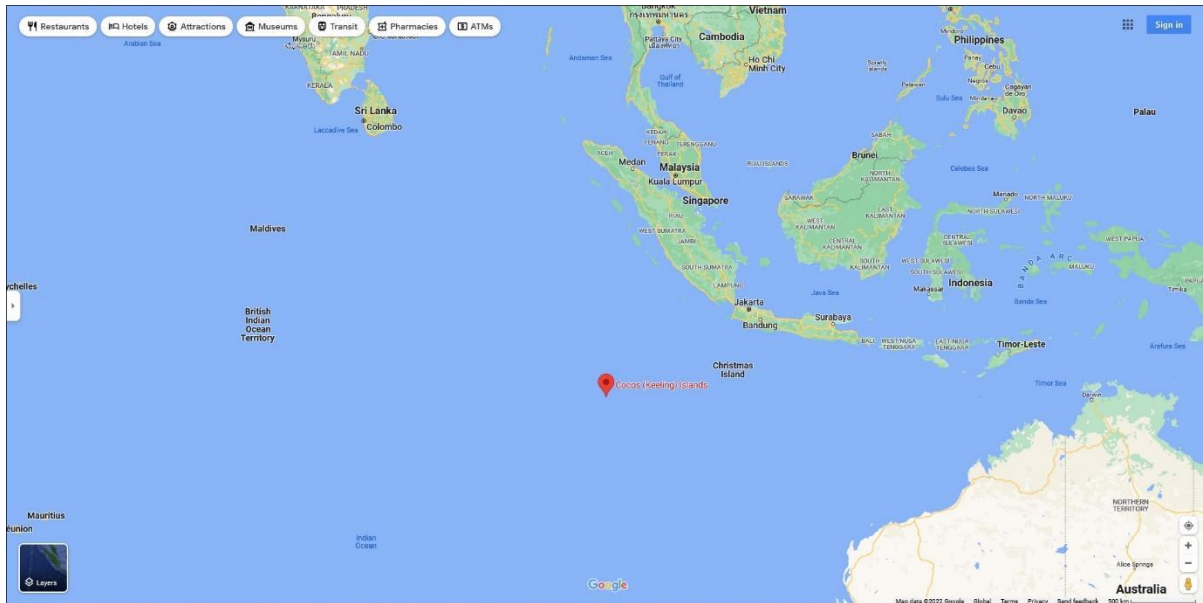


Figure 3: The location of Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean.¹³

India-Australia Countering Piracy

In 2013, India and Australia remained a part of the international 34-nation naval partnership known as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and the Combined Task Force-151 (CTF-151) to fight piracy in the Indian Ocean, especially in the vicinity of the Gulf of Aden to fight Somali pirates.¹⁴ One can well expect that in the foreseeable future both navies could share expertise in conducting counter piracy operations in the high seas.

Analysis and Examination

Since 2006, there has been a visible pattern of cooperation and coordination between India and Australia, especially in their bilateral defence relations. It was rightly noted that “India and Australia have long operated in largely separate strategic spheres.”¹⁵ However, provided the huge landmass shared by both countries in their specific continents, both have enormous potential in terms of becoming a manufacturing hub. It is to be noted here that India has a huge industrial base as well as

¹² Kapoor, ‘India, Australia Open up Military Bases amid China Row’.

¹³ ‘Cocos (Keeling) Islands’.

¹⁴ ‘Australia Continues Commitment to Counter Piracy Operations’, *Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)*, 3 October 2013, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2013/10/03/australia-continues-commitment-to-counter-piracy-operations/>.

¹⁵ Brewster, ‘The India-Australia Security and Defence Relationship: Developments, Constraints and Prospects’, 65.

a market that could fulfil Australian defence needs and could share its expertise in defence equipment manufacturing. India recently launched its indigenously built and conventionally powered aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant* that could attract cooperation and even joint ventures from its Australian counterparts. Last year on September 15, Australia signed an agreement called AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) with the U.S. and U.K. for cooperation in Canberra's bid to build nuclear powered attack submarines.¹⁶ However, Australia does not have the prerequisite nuclear power and can readily borrow nuclear fissile material from India.

Also, besides their separate strategic spheres, both countries share grievances-turned apparent hostility towards China. Recently, the Solomon Islands – an important country located in Australia's strategic sphere – signed a security agreement with China that raised alarms in Canberra about the growing Chinese footprint in Oceania and the Pacific.¹⁷ Consequently, it is an imperative for Australia to establish and strengthen its presence in the Indian Ocean and to look for new security partners in the region.

Kakadu Naval Exercise and Talisman Sabre Exercise

The Kakadu Naval Exercise is held biennially. This year, a total of 14 navies including Pakistan Navy, took part in the exercise hosted by the Royal Australian Navy.¹⁸ The Indian Navy also took part in the exercise and such ventures could open up new horizons of mutual cooperation between the Indian as well as Australian naval forces. In 2021, the Indian armed forces observed the Talisman Sabre Exercise held every two years in Australia at the special invitation.¹⁹

Conclusions

Contemporarily, the two Quad members i.e., India and Australia are the new security partners and their mutual defence relations could have a significant effect on the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Australia will host the 2023 in-person Quad Summit as well and it would not be ambitious to assume that their grievances-turned-hostility in relation to China has greatly helped in aligning their

¹⁶ 'Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS', *The White House*, 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aukus/>.

¹⁷ Damien Cave, 'China and Solomon Islands Draft Secret Security Pact, Raising Alarm in the Pacific', *The New York Times*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/world/asia/china-solomon-islands-security-pact.html>.

¹⁸ 'Kakadu 2022 Set to Be Biggest Ever', *Australian Government, Department of Defence*, 1 August 2022, <https://news.defence.gov.au/international/kakadu-2022-set-be-biggest-ever>.

¹⁹ Stephen Dziedzic, 'Australia and India Vow to Strengthen Military Ties during First Meeting of Defence and Foreign Ministers', *ABC News*, 12 September 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-12/australia-and-india-vow-to-strengthen-military-ties/100454992>.

strategic orientation.²⁰ We can well imagine their bilateral defence relations to grow and the signing of new defence and technology related agreements, e.g., the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement signed in 2020. Such agreements would significantly enhance the defence manufacturing capabilities of India that could benefit New Delhi's defence and strategic partners. Alternatively, we may characterize the bilateral relations between the two as the precursors of a new partnership in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Further, such initiatives could be challenging for an important player in the Indian Ocean i.e., Pakistan; nonetheless, challenges bring opportunities as well and the Pakistani policymakers could pursue their interests in the midst of a growing India-Australia relations.

²⁰ 'Australia to Host next In-Person Quad Summit in 2023', *The Print*, 24 May 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/australia-to-host-next-in-person-quad-summit-in-2023/968894/>.

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