

India in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper

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The 2016 Defence White Paper suggests that a realistic appraisal of India's intentions, capabilities, and capacity for strategic partnership has emerged in Canberra. This article analyses this White Paper's treatment of India in the light of those found in its predecessors. It argues that while Australia's defence planners have in the past neglected India and then over-emphasised its potential, the 2016 White Paper presents a more sober view of a maturing partnership, albeit one that gives little away about how it might evolve in coming years.

The 2016 Defence White Paper¹ indicates the Australia-India security partnership is maturing, but gives little indication of how in coming years the partnership might broaden beyond existing mechanisms for dialogue, cooperation, and policy coordination. This reflects recent experience: since 2000, most of the major changes that have occurred in those areas of the bilateral relationship concerned with defence and security have occurred between White Papers, unheralded by them: in 2003 and 2006, major Memoranda of Understanding were agreed; in November 2009, six months after that year's White Paper was released, a "Strategic Partnership" was announced by Joint Declaration; and in late 2014, a wide-ranging Framework on Security Cooperation was agreed. But despite the lack of a clear roadmap for the further evolution of the Australia-Indian partnership, the 2016 White Paper indicates that the relationship is reasonably robust and grounded in shared interests, especially concerning maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

Looking Back

India barely figured in the 1976 Defence White Paper, beyond being designated one of three states—along with China and Japan—with which Australia wished to have "friendly relations".² In 1987, India fared even worse, not meriting a single mention. It was only in 1994 that India started to figure with any prominence in the calculations of Australian strategic planners, following several years of official and scholarly complaints about Australia's "neglect" of the South Asian power.³ That year's White Paper,

¹ Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

² Department of Defence, *Australian Defence* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976), p. 5.

³ Ian Hall, 'Australia's Fitful Engagements of India', in Ian Hall (ed.), *The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), pp. 133-35.

Defending Australia, noted India's accelerating economic growth and the possibility that India, already an "important player" in the Indian Ocean region, "may become a key element of the wider strategic balance in Asia".⁴ For these reasons, the 1994 White Paper looked forward to discussions with India (albeit only on an "opportunity basis") to build "understanding of its strategic perceptions and priorities, and [to] encourage India to understand our interests".⁵

Although the bilateral relationship was shaken by India's nuclear tests in 1998 and Australia's overzealous response, the 2000 White Paper nevertheless expressed confidence in India's growing role in regional security and a desire to move beyond *ad hoc* conversations on defence and security issues towards more institutionalised discussions.⁶ This aim was soon achieved, in the form of the India-Australia Strategic Dialogue, first held in August 2001, which helped lay the groundwork for a series of bilateral security cooperation deals, notably the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Combating International Terrorism (2003), the MoU on Defence Cooperation (2006), and the India-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (2009).

As a consequence of these various moves, by the time of the 2009 White Paper it was possible to describe India as one of Australia's "key strategic partners", as *Force 2030* put it, alongside the United States and Japan.⁷ "India", it observed, is "an important partner for Australia given our shared democratic values, our maritime interests, and our commitment to combating regional and global terrorism and maintaining a rules-based global security order".⁸ *Force 2030* looked forward to building a much broader-based partnership, with further high-level dialogues, military personnel exchanges and educational opportunities, counter-terrorism coordination and, in particular, cooperation on enhancing maritime security in the Indian Ocean.⁹

This enthusiasm for the strategic partnership did not, however, carry through fully into the 2013 White Paper, *Defending Australia and its National*

See also the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Report, *Australia-India Relations: Trade and Security* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1990).

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia: Defence White Paper 1994* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), p. 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), p. 38.

⁷ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), p. 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Interests, despite its much-hyped use of the “Indo-Pacific” concept.¹⁰ It took a more cautious line about India, observing that “[o]ver time, [it] will become a very important partner in building security in the Indian Ocean and broader ... region” but making relatively vague commitments to developing and expanding the strategic partnership, especially concerning maritime security. Oddly, and discordantly, for some Indian observers, the White Paper also declared “the maintenance of peace between India and Pakistan” an Australian “national interest” in South Asia, alongside counter-terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation, and expressed concern that a “large-scale India-Pakistan conflict cannot be ruled out”, perhaps triggered by a terrorist attack.¹¹ In sum, the 2013 Paper suggested that what one prominent analyst has called the “limits of strategic convergence” between Australia and India had been reached, at least for the moment.¹²

Looking Forward

The language of the 2016 White Paper indicates some enthusiasm and momentum has been restored in the strategic partnership since the Gillard Government’s version was published. The election of Narendra Modi as Indian Prime Minister in May 2014 and especially the optics and outcomes of his state visit to Australia six months later, during which Modi presented himself as a much more pragmatic and effective leader than India has had for some time, are the most likely catalysts for this change of mood. While in Canberra, Modi signed a Framework on Security Cooperation agreement and promised a swift conclusion to talks about a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA).¹³ As David Brewster noted, the Framework agreement confirmed both sides’ desire to see regular bilateral defence and security dialogues continue, but also signalled a range of new

¹⁰ This was to be expected: the “Indo-Pacific” concept is used by some analysts to draw India into Australia’s strategic calculus, but the majority of Australia’s strategic interests arguably still lie in East Asia and the Pacific, and the ability of India to affect those interests will remain limited for some time to come. Moreover, Australia’s engagement of India over the past fifteen years has ebbed and flowed, after a lag, with the United States’ engagement of India, and that process lost momentum after Barack Obama replaced George W. Bush as President in 2009. See Hall, ‘Australia’s Fitful Engagements of India’ and David J. Karl, ‘U.S.-India Relations: The Way Forward’, *Orbis*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2012), pp. 308-27.

¹¹ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), p. 16. On maritime security, see especially p. 26 and p. 65, and for evidence of the Indian elite’s somewhat puzzled reception of the claim, see Arvind Gupta, ‘Australia in the Asian Century: Australian Government’s White Paper, Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security’, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2013), p. 509. Gupta was then the director general of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi; he is currently India’s Deputy National Security Advisor.

¹² David Brewster, ‘Australia and India: The Indian Ocean and the Limits of Strategic Convergence’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 5 (2010), pp. 549-65. See also Melissa H. Conley Tyler and Aakriti Bhutoria, ‘Diverging Australian and Indian Views on the Indo-Pacific’, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2015), pp. 225-36.

¹³ While in Australia, Modi promised that the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) would be concluded by the end of 2015, but at the time of writing, it had not yet been signed.

initiatives.¹⁴ Particularly notable were the commitments to enhanced cooperation in border protection, export control regimes concerned with nuclear materials, and counter-terrorism, which involved intelligence exchanges and discussion about counter-radicalisation, terrorist financing, and the use of cyberspace. For the first time, Australia and India also announced the desire to collaborate in the development of defence technology. And the Framework deal looked forward to further military-to-military cooperation on search and rescue, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping operations.

The 2016 White Paper reaffirms Australia's desire to see these commitments realised. The tepid references to India in its predecessor are replaced with more positive terms: India is referred to as a "key partner" in the present, not future, tense, and a partner with which Australia shares "key interests in regional stability and order" across the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ The focus on maritime security and on collaboration within and around the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and Indian Ocean Rim Association (what used to be the Indian Ocean Region Association for Regional Cooperation, or IOR-ARC) is, if anything, sharpened, reflecting the work done by both countries to make these bodies more salient and effective. The Paper does, admittedly, mention India-Pakistan tensions and their possession of nuclear weapons, but in what seems to be a softening of language from the 2013 version, it simply notes "the continuing need for mutual dialogue and restraint" (para 2.96).

In quite general terms, the 2016 White Paper looks to "mature and deepen practical engagement" with India, along with Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and China (para 5.17), with maritime security at the forefront. As before, it looks to further meaningful, regular bilateral dialogues, but also to training and joint exercises, noting that the first ever Australia-India naval exercise took place in 2015 (para 5.70). Echoing the 2014 Framework on Security Cooperation agreement, rather than the 2013 White Paper, it also signals further cooperation in the areas of "counter-terrorism, capability acquisition and defence science and technology" (para 5.70). Finally, and in comparatively vague terms, it looks forward to efforts to coordinate security policies at regional multilateral forums, including the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers'-Plus meeting (para 5.71).

Conclusion

The 2016 Defence White Paper does not, then, signal anything particularly new in Australia's defence policy towards India, but it does highlight the extent to which the bilateral security partnership has evolved, since the early

¹⁴ David Brewster, 'The Australia-India Framework for Security Cooperation: Another Step Towards an Indo-Pacific Security Partnership', *Security Challenges*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2015), pp. 39-48.

¹⁵ Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, pp. 22, 62, para 2.93.

2000s, in ways that better recognise its possibilities and its limits. The language it uses about India is warm, but realistic, and emphasises interests rather than ideals. Some critics might point out a few quirks or curiosities in the treatment of India—despite the ubiquity of the phrase ‘rules-based order’ in the Paper as a whole, for example, it never appears in the discussions of India’s rise or its possible intentions. But on the whole, the 2016 Paper suggests that Australia has moved beyond early doubts and periodic bouts of excitement about India’s potential as a regional power towards a more sober and calibrated assessment of its intentions, capabilities, and capacity for strategic partnership.

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