



# RESEARCH NOTE

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## Australia–India Relations: Strategic Convergence?

The Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee will be visiting Australia in the period 3–5 October. This will be the first visit to Australia by an Indian Prime Minister since Rajiv Gandhi's visit in October 1986.

Bilateral political relations were virtually frozen in the wake of the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998. The first sign of relaxation of tensions between the two countries came with the visit of the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Mr Tim Fischer, in February 1999. This was followed by the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, in March 2000, the same month as US President Clinton's widely publicised visit to India. During his visit, Mr Downer announced the reinstatement of defence relations and the resumption of Australia's aid program. Full normalisation of relations was symbolised by the visit of Prime Minister Howard in July 2000.

An important milestone in the development of bilateral relations was achieved by the visit of the Indian Minister for External Affairs (and Defence) Jaswant Singh in June this year. It was a first bilateral visit not in conjunction with any other event. During his visit it was agreed that the two countries would initiate a strategic dialogue at a senior official level. The two countries expressed a willingness to work towards stability in the region.

During the same period, Indo-US relations have developed at an even faster pace. Even before President Clinton's visit, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Karl Inderfurth had made it clear that US–India relations would

not be hostage to US relations with any other country (i.e. Pakistan and China) and that India was viewed as a 'key player in global affairs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as a vital contributor to overall Asian regional peace and stability'.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, during his visit to India, President Clinton and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee resolved to 'create a closer and qualitatively new relationship' between the two countries and agreed to hold regular India–US 'summit meetings, an annual foreign policy dialogue, continue the ongoing security dialogue and that the joint working group on counter-terrorism would continue to meet regularly'.<sup>2</sup>

Under the new Bush administration Indo-US relations have developed at a pace that few could have foreseen. In his confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the then Secretary of State designate Colin Powell stated '*...India has the potential to help keep the peace in the vast Indian Ocean area and its periphery. We need to work harder and more consistently to help them in this endeavor ...*' (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> During a visit to Washington by the Indian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence, Jaswant Singh in April, his meeting with the National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice was 'interrupted' by President Bush who then proceeded to have a 40 minute ostensibly unscheduled private dialogue with him.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from US allies, India was perhaps one of the very few countries to be informed of President Bush's forthcoming speech on his proposals for a National Missile Defence Program (NMD) on 1 May. India's swift, albeit carefully ambiguous response

to the proposals was followed by a visit of US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage soon after.<sup>5</sup>

The appointment of Dr Robert Blackwill, 'a confidante of the President and his National Security Adviser, Dr Condoleezza Rice',<sup>6</sup> as US ambassador to India is an indicator of the importance that the Bush administration has placed on its relations with India. In a recent speech to the Confederation of Indian Industry, Blackwill emphasised this aspect of US foreign policy, saying 'President Bush has a global approach to US–India relations, *consistent with the rise of India as a world power...* because no nation ... can promote its values and advance its interests without the help of allies and friends'. (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

In the coming months, several high-ranking US officials are expected to visit India, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Treasury Secretary Ken Dam, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>8</sup> Indo-US defence dialogue (as distinct from the security dialogue) will also resume by the end of the year.<sup>9</sup>

### Australian Strategic Perspectives

Traditionally, Australia's foreign policy focus has been on East Asia, a region stretching from Japan at one end and Thailand at the other. India has been relegated into a separate 'box' and relations with it treated as such. By doing so, some very obvious facts have been consistently overlooked by Australian analysts. Not only is India the largest power in the ocean named after it, it also has the largest navy and coast guard of any littoral

state between the two most important commercial straits in the world—Hormuz and Malacca. In addition, not only are the Straits of Malacca and the Strait of Lombok acknowledged to be two of the most crucial strategic straits in the world, more than half the world's maritime trade passes through them. Finally, a sizeable proportion of Australia's maritime trade towards the west passes through the Strait of Lombok and then through Malacca.

However, it would appear that this focus is in the process of changing. The first official India–Australia Strategic Dialogue was held in New Delhi on 30 August 2001. The talks were 'open, constructive and wide-ranging, and demonstrated shared perspectives and common interests on a number of important issues, including in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The delegates agreed that both countries were factors for stability in these regions'.<sup>10</sup> The agenda included regional security issues including 'particular security situations *in the broad Asia-Pacific region*' (emphasis added), and maritime security. A significant feature of these talks was that as well as foreign affairs officials, each delegation also included a senior armed forces officer.

## India's Presence in the Region

More than a thousand miles from its mainland, India has long had a naval, air and coastguard presence in the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands, the southmost of which is barely 90 nautical miles from the troubled Indonesian province of Aceh. Of the 600-island cluster, over 300 are inhabited and are suspected of being used as transit points by gun runners, smugglers (including drug smugglers) and poachers. The region is also notorious for acts of piracy.

Recognising this, India has been coordinating its efforts to combat these threats not only with countries in the region but with countries as

far away as Japan. A joint Indo-Japan Coast Guard Exercise took place for the first time in Indian waters in the period 5–9 November 2000, and a second joint exercise was conducted off the coast of Japan earlier this year.

In August 2001, India decided to set up its first tri-services command, the Far Eastern Strategic Command based at Port Blair in the Andamans. It is expected to become operational by the end of September.<sup>11</sup> Military presence already includes air force helicopters, three naval Fast Attack Craft (FAC) and coast guard vessels (under the operational control of the navy). More Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) and landing craft are planned to be stationed in the future. Eventually, India is expected to have a full strength army component and an air base in the Andamans. This will give India not only strategic depth but also the potential to protect maritime traffic bound for Australia and the South China Sea.

This, combined with rapid developments in Indo-US strategic relations and the US's declared policy of ensuring international security in cooperation with allies and friends provides Australia with an excellent opportunity to enhance security cooperation with India. Delay would only result in Australia falling behind strategic developments in the region.

Instead of the traditional East Asia perspective, Australian emphasis should change to an Asia-Pacific one in its broadest sense. Given the nature of subjects covered in the recently concluded strategic dialogue, it would appear that a tentative start has been made. Greater naval cooperation with India would be a good starting point and a case could be made for the establishment of an Australian coast guard to become part of a network of regional coast guards policing non-military threats. Greater recognition should be given to the fact that the threats in the region are

largely non-military—piracy, drugs, arms and people smuggling to name a few, threats which India and Australia share in common.

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1. The President's Trip to South Asia: An Overview, *Washington File*, 9 March 2000.
2. *Washington File*, 21 May 2000.
3. *Washington File*, 17 January 2001.
4. *The Hindu*, 15 April 2001.
5. For details see Ravi Tomar, 'US Missile Defence Program: Responses from South Asia', *Research Note*, no. 30, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2000–01.
6. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Christina B. Rocca in a speech to the Indian American Friendship Council, *Washington File*, 18 July 2001.
7. *Washington File*, 4 September 2001.
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9. *The Hindu*, 31 August 2001.
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