

The Indo-Pacific pivot

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A new plan for Australian defence policy has big implications for India. For New Delhi, the good news is that Canberra's 2013 Defence White Paper (WP), launched by Prime Minister Julia Gillard last week, sharply redefines Australia's region of strategic interest as being broadly the same as India's: the Indo-Pacific.

The downside is that the Australian policy statement also seems to take a soft line on China at a time when some of Beijing's actions — not least the latest challenge on the disputed border with India — continue to unnerve the region. Both these apparent changes in Australia's defence outlook are worth clarifying, and the Australian government should move quickly to do so.

India should take comfort from the first shift. As the WP says, a new "Indo-Pacific strategic arc" is connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia. This new framework is forged by several factors: notably the massive growth in trade, energy and investment flows between East Asia and the Indian Ocean rim, and the rise of India as an important strategic, economic and diplomatic power beyond South Asia.

This declaration makes Australia the first country in the world officially to recognise its region as the Indo-Pacific rather than the Asia-Pacific. It will almost certainly not be the last. Indo-Pacific thinking is also gaining traction in Delhi, Washington, Tokyo and parts of Southeast Asia. The term has been used by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, notably, last December, when he moved to enhance India's relations with ASEAN. And it makes objective sense as a description of the commercial and security linkages that will determine whether the Asian century is marked by prosperity or conflict.

In turning decisively Indo-Pacific in its rhetoric, Australia has identified India's rise and growing eastward orientation as a major and positive development in the changing Asian strategic order. The policy paper states: "The Indo-Pacific... adjusts Australia's priority strategic focus to the arc extending from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, including the sea lines of communication on which the region depends." Crucially, Australia is neither worried nor even ambivalent about India's growing naval weight. The paper emphasises that Canberra wants to work more closely with Delhi and the Indian navy to keep that order stable and peaceful.

Of course, grand statements like this are often criticised for being more about ideas than action, and the test will be whether Australia and India can turn their converging interests into practical arrangements like naval exercises, technology partnerships and shared maritime surveillance. The onus here will be as much on India as on Australia, and ideas like three-way cooperation and dialogue with Indonesia deserve fresh consideration.

Meanwhile, on the question of a supposed Australian tilt to China, there is less to the new Australian defence document than meets the eye. To be sure, it takes a less confrontational approach towards Beijing than former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2009 defence policy, which spoke of the need for Australia to be able to fight a major power in a contested Asia (and we all know he didn't mean America, India or Japan). The new Australian paper baldly states that Australia "does not approach China as an adversary" and is meeker than it could have been when comes to pointing the finger at China for assertive actions at sea or a lack of transparency in its military spending.

But deep down, there is continuity in Australian defence policy on China. Australia remains profoundly connected to the US as an ally, and the softer language on China does not contradict the fact that

US-Australia security links are getting closer, with American Marines now in Darwin and US space-tracking assets being moved to Western Australia. The new policy confirms that Australia will also upgrade its airfield on Cocos Islands, some highly strategic territory in the Indian Ocean, for Australia's new fleet of P-8A Poseidon patrol aircraft. In time, that runway could also be used by the Americans. And if Australia-India ties grow close enough, conceivably, it might even be visited by India's Poseidons too.

Most importantly, the new WP notes that Australia needs to be prepared to use its forces to help partners in the Indo-Pacific to resist coercion or the use of force. The new Australian defence policy will be criticised in some quarters for toning down the nation's ambitions to build a potent navy: an aspiration to build 12 new submarines is there, but its timeline has been pushed well into the 2030s. Australia, like India, is struggling to reconcile budgetary challenges with growing defence needs at a time when Indo-Pacific Asia is becoming increasingly armed and contested. But at least Canberra's new defence policy recognises the complexity of the region's security future. Australia's rhetorical Indo-Pacific pivot shows a welcome acknowledgement that China is not the only Asian power that matters.

The Indo-Pacific is not, as some would claim, an effort to exclude China from the regional order. Instead, it is an accurate description of the context within which China and India are rising. Australia's early recognition of that fact bodes well for that nation's efforts, with India and others, to contribute to a stable and multi-polar order that no single power can dominate.

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