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Time for Canberra and New Delhi to establish a new partnership

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Recent events are showing how India and Australia, two once-estranged Indian Ocean democracies, have begun a serious conversation about partnership for the 21st century.

This week, Australia's new foreign minister Julie Bishop is in India, flying the flag for the conservative government of Tony Abbott elected on September 7. She is visiting India before visiting China or even the US. Last week, the dynamic Indian diaspora in Australia hosted a regional Pravasi Bharatiya Divas event in Sydney to mark the contribution that people-to-people ties are making to diplomacy.

And in celebration of that societal bond, on November 18 Australians and Indians will share their liking of lively debate when a leading Australian talk show, called simply Q&A, broadcasts simultaneously Down Under and across India from Gurgaon with a mostly Indian panel.

Business has led the way in leading these two proud nations away from a history of mutual indifference. Sure we have long shared a passion for cricket, but for many years there was diplomatic wariness between us.

The rise of India as a trading economy and a destination for Australian resource exports, like coal and gold, began to change that. But there is no substitute for people in building trust between nations. More than 300,000 people in today's Australia were born in India and that's not counting second and successive generations. They add greatly to Australia's prosperity and resilience. They are more likely to be young, educated and employed than the wider population.

India is now consistently one of Australia's top five export markets, with a focus on energy and education. It is also a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific Asian region. Australians and Indians forget that their militaries have a long history of shared sacrifice, from Gallipoli in Turkey in World War I to Tobruk in North Africa and right across Southeast Asia in World War II. Some early Indian migrants were among the Australian soldiers whose courage defined Australian nationhood amid the carnage of 1914-1918.

In Afghanistan, Australian troops have been fighting jihadists that are India's enemies too. Both countries have an interest in an Asian order where China's rise is peacefully managed and where no country is destabilisingly dominant. No wonder the Abbott government recognises India as critical to Australia's future.

The crisis a few years ago about the safety of Indian students in Australia had a silver lining of compelling the two governments to engage more closely with each other. Many Indians now have sophisticated views of modern, multicultural Australia. Polling by the Lowy Institute and the Australia India Institute shows they generally have high regard for Australia, from its institutions to

its values and its achievements in science, not just sport. Most continue to see it as a good place to be educated, second only to America.

But polling also shows that negative perceptions linger about racism and safety. In response, the Indian-Australian community will keep championing this country and its interests. They in turn need to be confident that Australia is living up to its promise of opportunity, fairness and respect.

The Abbott government needs to show constancy and patience in engaging India. It needs to be ready to engage with whatever leadership the world's largest democratic process delivers next year. Canberra should press India to place fresh priority on relations with Australia, including a prime ministerial visit around the November 2014 G20 summit in Brisbane.

In the meantime, Canberra should keep expanding defence cooperation with New Delhi, while moving to finalise a non-discriminatory uranium export safeguards agreement. Yet more important than grand diplomacy is simply letting India and Australia play to their greatest strength — people.

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