

# The India-Australia bond and its impact on the Indo-Pacific

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For several decades, the relationship between Australia and India seemed limited to Commonwealth, cricket and curry. Today however, geostrategic changes, globalisation and a rush of new technology are pushing the two nations into an ever closer political, economic, diplomatic and military relationship. This shift has not happened slowly, with the last five years seeing an accelerating flurry of activities between the two nations. One of which is the [Pitch Black](#) air defence exercise between the Royal Australian Air Force and the Indian Air Force, which involved the deployment of an Indian Navy P-8 maritime patrol aircraft to Darwin.



RAAF's F/A-18F Super Hornet (top) and Indian Air Force SU-30MKI Flanker Aircraft (bottom) during Pitch Black 18 air defence exercise between India and Australia.

The Air and Space Power Centre (ASPC) has reinvigorated links with the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) in New Delhi. Recently, the ASPC contributed a chapter to a new CAPS book edited by Air Marshal Anil Chopra: "The Great Game in the Indo-Pacific: A Pivot to India." [Chopra \(2022\)](#) collated experts to discuss and provide deeply insightful assessments of the Indian's geostrategic situation. I wrote the ASPC's chapter where I delve into newly created institutions and organizations, key contemporary issues, strategic culture and increasing defence cooperation ([Layton, 2022](#)). Some of the latter might be of interest to the readers of this blog. This blog summarises some of the key points I covered in the chapter.

## Australia-India defence cooperation

I started the chapter by discussing the overarching agreements for Australia-India defence cooperation, which are mostly in place as proven in [AUSINDEX](#) and [Exercise Malabar](#). This success can now be built on. In fact, the Indian Air Force has already deployed to Pitch Black with expectations that this will become a regular event.

Moreover, India and the United States Air Force (USAF) have held several [Cope India air exercises](#) -- the last in West Bengal. The RAAF could perhaps join and deploy Super Hornets and a KC-30A tanker, mirroring Indian participation in Pitch Black. The involvement of an E-7A Wedgetail AEW&C aircraft might also be useful.

Building on the recent Indian Navy P-8 deployment, the two countries could also undertake

reciprocal P-8 maritime surveillance patrols through each other's airfields. Australia is [upgrading the Cocos Islands airfield](#) for P-8 use while India is [upgrading the runways](#) at Indian Naval Station's Kohassa and Baaz on the North Andaman and Great Nicobar Island respectively. Maritime patrols through such airfields would deepen interoperability and significantly increase maritime domain awareness across the strategically important Malacca, Lombok and Sunda straits.

In a similar manner, the RAN could possibly develop a deeper relationship with the Indian Coast Guard as the RAN brings 12 [PV80 Arafura](#) Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV) into service. The Indian Coast Guard has 26 OPVs in use, some twice the Arafura class's tonnage. Both Services could gain through cooperating in this new field.

## Joint warfare

Another new area which I covered in the chapter is the potential for collaboration on joint warfare. India's army, navy and air force have considerable individual expertise and experience, however, [Hashim \(2021\)](#) considers this is "less joint" than it could be. On the other hand, Australia having much smaller individual Services embraced "jointness" several decades ago. For example, Australia's Chief of Defence Force was first appointed in 1984 whereas [India's comparable position](#) was established in 2020. India could leverage off Australia's considerable experience in joint organisational structures, staff processes and doctrinal matters to avoid repeating Australia's earlier missteps and to gain possibly useful insights from Australia's perceived successes.

In the same vein, Australia [recently invited India](#) to fully participate in Talisman Sabre in 2023. This is Australia's largest combined and joint, multilateral military training exercise and held biennially. Talisman [Sabre 21 included](#) amphibious forces, brigade-sized land forces and considerable air assets from Australia, the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, the UK and New Zealand. Involvement by India may enhance its joint warfare capabilities and interoperability with other Indo-Pacific militaries. Joint warfare may be a potential key area of military strength relative to regional competitors.

## 4IR prototype warfare

Beyond operational matters, I further discussed how Australia and India could collaborate in innovative capabilities, particularly in the fourth industrial revolution's (4IR) prototype warfare concept ([Layton, 2018](#)). In this framework, several diverse prototypes are developed and then evaluated, with successful prototypes then produced in limited numbers for quick introduction into-service. The intent is to rapidly field a variety of low-cost, less complex systems and then replace these with improved variants or something totally new on a regular basis.

RAAF's [Plan Jericho](#) fits this construct. The Jericho Edge team initially engages with partners to identify and understand emerging opportunities. The Edge team then brings in Jericho Labs to assemble communities of interest across large-organisations, start-ups, small companies and universities to discover, test, and prototype the identified opportunities. The separate Jericho Analytics team then tests the new ideas using net assessment, war gaming and red teaming. Recent examples include [balloon-born sensors](#) to give wide-area situational awareness for tracking bushfires, using artificial intelligence [to locate life rafts](#) in disaster at sea situations, and command and control [using augmented reality](#).

Embracing the prototype warfare concept and combining this with Jericho processes could allow Australia and India to readily collaborate in the near term to create innovative capabilities for operations other than war. This covers a large field with both nations deeply involved in humanitarian and disaster relief activities ([Canyon, 2021](#)), [maritime security](#), counter terrorism and the countering of grey zone activities ([Layton, 2021](#)).

The Australia-India relationship now has momentum. With both nations taking a pragmatic approach informed by their individual national goals and shared strategic interests, much can be accomplished. The near future looks bright.

## References

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