



EXPLORING AIR POWER IN INDIA-AUSTRALIA MILITARY DIPLOMACY

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The recent strategic engagement and frequent interaction between India and Australia (connected through the maritime domain) at various forums on multiple levels indicate the growing convergence of mutual interests, which also indicates the changing world order. The recently concluded Raisina Dialogue 2023, a flagship event of the Ministry of External Affairs (India) in collaboration with Observer Research Foundation, has several clues for the road ahead in the bilateral, Quad, and G-20 platforms.

India, over the last year, in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with its deft diplomacy, has surprised many nations and global groupings, including the internal audience. It would be an understatement to say that India is writing a new and audacious chapter in international relations and geopolitics. India is moving beyond the conventional themes of diplomacy, information, military, and economy (DIME) in strengthening its comprehensive national power. Rather, it ensures testing and utilising comprehensive national power's (CNP) critical components with defined objectives and result-driven deliverables. India's manifested conduct is based on pure logic and vision, which helps build its narrative with a new outlook. The two prime ministers of the respective countries singing their national anthems from the cricket field is nothing more than laying down a strong foundation for writing a new, long, and visionary chapter for a free and open Indo-Pacific through bilateral ties.

The Indo-Pacific is a multipolar region with over fifty per cent of the world's wealth and population. Both India and Australia have a strategic interest in maintaining balance in the Indo-Pacific. The execution of India's objectives in the Indo-Pacific region and the use of space as a component of a multipolar world order requires diplomatic manoeuvring and economic and military assertiveness. India's goal in the Indo-Pacific

area is to collaborate with like-minded nations to manage a rules-based multipolar regional order and prevent any single country from dominating the region or its waterways.

2022 has been an important milestone in reinitiating and fostering bilateral ties with an objective-driven approach. This is evident from the number of high-level bilateral visits by the political and military leadership.

For example, the Indian External Affairs Minister has

visited Australia thrice in the past year: for the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the 13th India-Australia Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue (FMFD), and just before Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited India last week.¹

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Growing Convergence in the Military Domain

RAAF Chief Visit to India

The Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld, visited New Delhi in May 2022 and held wide-ranging talks with the top military brass of India on ways to enhance bilateral military cooperation. The visiting military officer held separate talks with Army Chief General Manoj Pande, Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari, Navy Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar, and Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar. The focus of the discussion was to evaluate ways to boost defence ties between the two countries.²

CNS Visit to Australia

Admiral R. Hari Kumar, the Chief Indian of Naval Staff (CNS), visited Australia in September 2022. During the visit, he met with the three service chiefs and the Secretary of Defence. All leaders expressed their commitment to pursue collaborative activities in several areas of bilateral convergence. There was also an emphasis on exchanging intellectual thoughts through the Australian think tanks to understand and develop new maritime cooperation opportunities. The discussions also highlighted the need for raising the level of synergy and focusing efforts to overcome the challenges of the maritime environment.³

Australian CDS Interaction

During the Raisina Dialogue, General Anil Chauhan, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of India, was joined by General Angus J. Campbell, the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) of Australia, and General Jim Mattis, the former US Secretary of Defence, on a panel discussion on assessing contemporary conflicts. The Australian CDF also met the three service chiefs and the CDS separately to discuss the breadth of mutual cooperation across all domains. He stated, "it was an opportunity to reflect that strong relationships with our partners are critical to addressing global challenges."⁴ He also reiterated that

“the India-Australia defence partnership has never been stronger, and they discussed new initiatives to strengthen it further.”⁵

Young Defence Officers’ Exchange Programme

The India-Australia Young Military Officers’ Exchange Programme was instituted in memory of General Bipin Rawat, the first CDS of India. It was announced in March 2022, following a virtual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then-Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison.⁶ This initiative allows Australian officers to observe the training and procedures of the Indian military to create greater understanding and collaboration. The exchange programme exemplifies the nations’ shared desire to strengthen bilateral defence connections, cooperation, and collaboration through military-to-military and people-to-people ties.⁷ In a recent press release, Australian High Commissioner to India, Barry O’Farrell, stated, “This is a fantastic chance for India and Australia to educate their young defence officers about each other’s operational environments and improve our bilateral connection.”⁸ In addition to visiting several operational and training institutes, the defence officers also toured the Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS), the IAF’s networked battle management Centre.

In support of the ‘Made in India’ initiative, both nations are exploring new possibilities for partnership in the fields of defence industries, defence innovation, and developing defence technologies. It also strengthens the cooperation between the two navies in accordance with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two nations.

Australian CN visit to India

Vice Admiral Mark Hammond, the Australian Chief of Navy (CN), accompanied Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on a three-day formal visit to India. During the engagement, strategies to strengthen collaboration and interoperability in order to realise a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (IOR) were explored. In support of the ‘Made in India’ initiative, both nations are exploring new possibilities for partnership in the fields of defence industries, defence innovation, and developing defence technologies. It also strengthens the cooperation between the two navies in accordance with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two nations. The discussion of Subject Matter Experts (SME) from diverse disciplines has also found a place in the bilateral negotiations, which is a forward-thinking step towards the establishment of a long-term military association.⁹

Possible Air Power Diplomacy

While most bilateral military interactions are maritime-oriented due to the apparent connection of the oceans, there are quite a few avenues where the air domain can be gainfully utilised. Therefore, this medium must find a suitable place in military aerial diplomacy.

HADR/OOAC Operations

The most recent showcasing of effective air power is how India responded and reached out to Turkey in the earthquake-stricken scenario. This impressive display of soft power could only be achieved through the effective utilisation of air power. India and Australia could build up more such aerial capabilities for conducting trans-oceanic Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) or Out of Area Contingency (OOAC) operational capability.

The prospective High and Medium Altitude Long Endurance (HALE and MALE) UAVs, such as the Indian TAPAS BH 201 and the Australian MQ-4C Triton, could undertake integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in the Indo-Pacific.

UAV Technology Collaboration

The Information Fusion Centre (IFC)-IOR centre, hosted by the Indian Navy, was created in 2018 with a mandate from the Government of India “to enhance collaborative maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region, in line with India’s vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).”¹⁰ The centre aims to build a common and coherent maritime situation picture and act as a maritime security information-sharing hub for the region. As a result, India and Australia can exchange information on maritime threats and challenges, such as piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling.

India and Australia can enhance their military cooperation through the IFC-IOR by sharing information and collaborating on technology to improve the maritime security of the IOR and promote regional stability. Deployment of maritime surveillance technologies, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and satellite imagery, can enhance the surveillance capabilities of both countries and enable them to monitor the Indo-Pacific region more effectively. The prospective High and Medium Altitude Long Endurance (HALE and MALE) UAVs, such as the Indian TAPAS BH 201 and the Australian MQ-4C Triton, could undertake integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in the Indo-Pacific, and the fused picture could be downloaded into the IFC-IOR centre or into the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) network, keeping the military aspects of warfighting separate.

AWACS Diplomacy

AWACS diplomacy refers to using Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to enhance military and diplomatic cooperation between countries. For example, the United States has utilised AWACS aircraft to provide surveillance, command, and control support to its allies during conflicts such as the Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War. India and Australia both possess crucial AWACS systems, providing advanced surveillance and command and control capabilities that enhance their military and strategic capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries can utilise their AWACS aircraft to conduct joint maritime surveillance, patrol missions, and HADR efforts

in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, sharing intelligence and information gathered by their respective AWACS aircraft can improve situational awareness and enhance regional security. The Navy's P-8I maritime surveillance aircraft will increase operational efficiency in the integrated environment.

Air Power Think Tank

India's only aerospace power think tank, the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) and the Air and Space Power Centre of Australia (ASPC), entered into an accord in 2021 to promote intellectual content in the avenue of air power. Both think tanks have been participating in various discussions and webinars since then. These think tanks could become a 'Centre of Excellence' to curate multiple projects in the aerospace domain. Cross visits to various aerospace and military establishments and think tanks would enable, conceive, plan, and deliver action-oriented defence engagements.

India and Australia have ample opportunities to interact through the medium of air. And referring to it as 'aerial' or 'air power' diplomacy in the military sphere may be a good idea that can be further strengthened by outlining the current and future needs in the changing battlefield scenario.

Notes:

¹ "Jaishankar after meeting Australia PM: 'Discussed economy, India-Australia partnership and, of course, cricket'", *Indian Express*, February 18, 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/australia-jaishankar-albanese-bilateral-meeting-melbourne-cricket-8452439/>. Accessed on March 9, 2023.

² "Australian Air Force Chief holds talks with three service chiefs", *The Hindu*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/australian-air-force-chief-holds-talks-with-three-service-chiefs/article65399357.ece>. Accessed on March 10, 2023.

³ "Visit of Admiral R Hari Kumar Chief of The Naval Staff to Australia", Indian Navy, September 29, 2022, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/visit-admiral-r-hari-kumar-chief-naval-staff-australia>. Accessed on March 10, 2023.

⁴ Twitter, General Angus Campbell, @CDF_Aust, March 6, 2023, https://twitter.com/CDF_Aust/status/1632558904298045442?cxt=HHwWhICw2Y_rgagtAAAA. Accessed on March 9, 2023.

⁵ Twitter, General Angus Campbell, @CDF_Aust, March 6, 2023, https://twitter.com/CDF_Aust/status/1632591847930445825. Accessed on March 9, 2023.

⁶ "Australian military officers visit India under Gen Rawat memorial exchange programme", *Economic Times*, March 9, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/australian-military-officers-visit-india-under-gen-rawat-memorial-exchange-programme/articleshow/98522654.cms>. Accessed on March 11, 2023.

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⁷ “15 Australian officers visit Shatrueet Brigade under General Rawat Australia-India Young Defence Officers’ Exchange Programme”, ANI, March 9, 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/15-australian-officers-visit-shatrueet-brigade-under-general-rawat-australia-india-young-defence-officers-exchange-programme20230309213021/>. Accessed on March 10, 2023.

⁸ “General Rawat India-Australia Young Defence Officers’ Exchange Program- 2023”, Australian High Commission, New Delhi, March 2, 2023, <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/pa0123.html>. Accessed on March 11, 2023.

⁹ Manjeet Negi, “Australian Chief of Navy on 3-day visit to India, holds talks with Navy Chief Admiral Kumar”, *India Today*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/australian-chief-of-navy-on-visit-to-india-holds-talks-with-navy-chief-admiral-kumar-2345114-2023-03-11>. Accessed on March 11, 2023.

¹⁰ “Maritime Security: Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) And Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC)”, PIB, February 22, 2023, [https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1901371#:~:text=IFC%2DIOR%2C%2Ohosted%2Oby%2Othe,in%2Othe%2ORegion%2O\(SAGAR\)](https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1901371#:~:text=IFC%2DIOR%2C%2Ohosted%2Oby%2Othe,in%2Othe%2ORegion%2O(SAGAR)). Accessed on March 10, 2023.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd).

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