



08/24

10 May 2024

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND ITS DEFENCE COOPERATION WITH AUSTRALIA

Simran Walia

Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



Introduction

Since the Second World War, Australia has faced a more complicated and demanding strategic environment. It necessitates an integrated, national, and all-encompassing strategy for Australia's defence. In this context, Australia's first National Defence Strategy (NDS) came out in April 2024 with its accompanying Integrated Investment Plan (IIP). The defence strategy is founded on National Defence, which is a concept harnessing all arms of Australia's national power to achieve a unified approach to security.¹ According to the National Defence Strategy, defence preparation revolves around a strategy of denial. This strategy applies to all domains—maritime, land, air, space, and cyber—and directs the commitment to national security.

According to the NDS, Australia's strategic environment continues to deteriorate because of the US and China's growing strategic competition, significant wars in Europe and the Middle East, China's massive arms build-up, and persistent tensions in the South China Sea and over Taiwan.

The National Defence Strategy lays the foundation for the government's strategic decisions that will direct the major and immediate changes needed to overhaul the capabilities, force posture, force structure, acquisition, recruitment, and international involvement of the Defence Department. According to the NDS, Australia's strategic environment continues to deteriorate because of the US and China's growing strategic competition, significant wars in Europe and the Middle East, China's massive arms build-up, and persistent tensions in the South China Sea and over Taiwan.

Strategy of Denial

A Strategy of Denial will serve as the main pillar of defence strategy under the National Defence Strategy.² This strategy seeks to stop conflicts before they start, stop possible enemies from using force to compel Australia, promote security and development in the region, and maintain a favourable regional strategic balance.

Australia is attempting to forge closer partnerships with countries to respond to the strategic environment and maintain regional peace and prosperity.

The Integrated Investment Program and the National Defence Strategy work together to guarantee that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) can protect Australia's economic connections to the world and other regions, defend Australia and its immediate region, prevent any potential adversary from attempting to project power against Australia through its northern approaches, participate in the Indo-Pacific region's collective security with partners, and support the upkeep of the international rules-based order.

A generational investment in the posture, capability, and organisation of the ADF forms the foundation of the National Defence Strategy. The Albanese government is increasing defence funding by US \$5.7 billion for the next four years and US \$50.3 billion over the next ten years, above the previous trajectory throughout that time, following the release of the Defence Strategic Review last year.³ The government has decided to prioritise and finance the acquisition of critical capabilities to strengthen Australia's deterrence capabilities while rebuilding the Integrated Investment Program.

Furthermore, Defence's workforce strategies need to adapt as the ADF becomes a more cohesive and focused force to address the workforce crisis it is facing. It must find, hire, and develop the highly qualified and specialised labour force needed to fulfil the demands of national defence and meet defence capabilities requirements. To enable the major reform needed to implement the National Defence Strategy, defence must likewise keep changing its culture.

One of the explicit aspects of the Defence strategy is that Australia is attempting to forge closer partnerships with countries to respond to the strategic environment and maintain regional peace and prosperity. These alliances are also essential to upholding the international rules-based system and safeguarding Australia's economic ties to the rest of the world. The US-Australian relationship continues to be essential to Australia's national security. Building the capabilities of the ADF to deliver effective projection throughout the whole spectrum of proportionate reaction requires collaboration between Australia and the US under the auspices of AUKUS, together with the UK.

Additionally, Australia is attempting to make investments to strengthen defence ties with allies in the Indian Ocean, North Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. This involves continuing to strengthen the alliances with India and Japan. Moreover, Australia will

maintain close cooperation with important European countries and other like-minded allies beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Positioning India within the National Defence Strategy

According to Canberra's first national defence strategy, Australia views India as a "top-tier security partner" and is prioritising real, practical cooperation between the two countries that supports stability in the Indo-Pacific.⁴ Australia would strengthen defence cooperation to support India's important role in the region. Australia will look for ways to promote information sharing, business collaboration in the defence sector, and bilateral and multilateral cooperation with India.

Australia is attempting to make investments to strengthen defence ties with allies in the Indian Ocean, North Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. This involves continuing to strengthen the alliances with India and Japan.

The national defence policy aims to strengthen the ADF's warfighting and deterrence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, among other things, by forging closer alliances with important nations. Australia is to increase military spending by US \$50.3 billion over the next ten years, reaching US \$100 billion by 2033, according to Defence Minister Richard Marles.⁵

Australia is a trading nation, and its economic security and regional connectivity are greatly dependent on the Indian Ocean. Five of Australia's top 15 trading partners—India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand—border the Indian Ocean, and more than half of its seaborne exports depart from ports in the region.⁶ Australia has the longest coastline in the Indian Ocean and the biggest search and rescue zone in the area. Some of Australia's largest hydrocarbon reserves and significant offshore territories, such as the Cocos Keeling Islands, are located in the Indian Ocean. As a result, Australia's economic and national security are heavily dependent on the Indian Ocean, especially the Northeast Indian Ocean. This was stated in the country's 2020 Defence Strategic Update and reiterated in the government's statement in response to the most recent Defence Strategic Review.⁷

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the defence and security cooperation between Australia and India, two countries that are part of the Quad grouping alongside the United States and Japan. Apart from engaging in various military training exercises, Australia and India also take part in the yearly Malabar naval exercise alongside the other two members of the Quad. India and Australia agreed to utilise each other's military sites for logistical support when they signed the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) in 2020.⁸ Concerns over China's aggressive actions throughout the area have been a major driving force behind the military cooperation.

In September 2021, both nations' first round of 2+2 ministerial conversations

between their defence and foreign ministries began. This illustrates the degree of importance both nations place on their bilateral relationship to handle the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region. India's participation in ministerial level 2+2 discussions is limited to a select few nations, namely the US and Japan, indicating the significance of India's relationship with Australia.

There has been a noticeable increase in the defence and security cooperation between Australia and India, two countries that are part of the Quad grouping alongside the United States and Japan.

Intending to strengthen maritime cooperation, Australia and India organised their first formal bilateral naval exercise (AUSINDEX) in 2015 off the coast of Visakhapatnam. The dedication to enhancing maritime cooperation is demonstrated by Vice Admiral Mark Hammond, the Chief of the Royal Australian Navy, who recently visited India. As a reflection of the strengthening defence relations between Australia and India, discussions centred on increasing operational engagements, training exchanges, and intelligence sharing.

The Royal Australian Air Force and the Indian Air Force have been conducting increasingly sophisticated and intense flying drills. Specifically, Exercise Pitch Black has given the countries' air forces exceptional and noteworthy chances to collaborate, practice battle tactics, and engage in challenging aerial manoeuvres.⁹

Furthermore, strong interpersonal ties between Australia and India's armed forces are still being developed through frequent personnel and training exchanges, including short-term specialised courses and longer-term postings. Australia sends two officers to India each year to attend military academies: one officer studies at the Defence Services Staff College and the other at the National Defence College. Similarly, every year, India sends two officers to study in Australia. The first officer goes to the Command and Staff College in Australia, while the other officer studies at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies.

Other larger minilateral engagements that Australia and India have benefited from include the more useful Australia-India-Japan supply chain resilience program and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad). The two nations have made use of these venues to communicate the vital significance of international law and to prevent Asia from taking on a hegemonic role. Despite being cautiously worded to avoid giving names, the message is directed at China.

The new strategy identifies important allies in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Japan and India, to strengthen defence alliances. It indicates that Australia should "work with other key partners - notably New

India and Australia agreed to utilise each other's military sites for logistical support when they signed the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) in 2020.

Zealand, Japan, our partners in Southeast Asia and the Pacific family, the Republic of Korea, India as well as the UK and other European nations - that share our concerns" in light of the ongoing deterioration of the strategic environment and the "competition [that] is playing out in military and non-military ways."¹⁰

Australia's defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean would prioritise regularising the ADF's presence, which includes boosting deployments, training and exercises with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and enhancing regional maritime domain awareness, in addition to interacting with India. The strategy has also widely identified other flashpoints, such as territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas and the Sino-Indian border, as well as "the [growing] risk of a crisis or conflict in the Taiwan Strait." The strategy also places a lot of emphasis on the growing rivalry for "access and influence across the Indian Ocean," which includes vital ports and is something that worries India.

By "deepening and complexifying defence cooperation," including "bilateral and multilateral cooperation, defence industry cooperation, and information sharing," Canberra would continue to support India's pivotal position in the region.¹¹ Developments in India-Pakistan and India-China ties are also mentioned in the strategy, as they carry the risk of nuclear weapons use or proliferation, a factor in each potential flashpoint.

Australia is strengthening security alliances as a result of its rising concerns about China. Canberra is becoming more serious about bolstering its defence capabilities, as well as improving military flexibility and interoperability with important partners, with the establishment of AUKUS and the Australia-Japan security cooperation agreement. As efforts to entice other powerful nations from outside the region to bolster the military might in the Indo-Pacific escalate, numerous bilateral and other agreements are on the horizon. European superpowers like the United Kingdom and France have shown that they are interested in helping to keep the Indo-Pacific region stable.

This year, the Indian military is expected to undergo one of the biggest restructurings in its history with the establishment of multiple new joint commands.¹² With one of the largest militaries in the world and as one of Australia's closest allies, the nation's defence policies are extremely important to both the Indo-Pacific region and Australia. Once formed, India's combined commands may make it easier for Australia and India to cooperate on defence matters.¹² Planning for inter-service cooperation is essential for amphibious exercises and cooperative humanitarian aid missions, which should be simpler if there is no longer a need to coordinate with numerous silos on both sides.

Australia is committed to reinforcing India's strategic position in the region by expanding the scope and intricacy of its defence cooperation. The Australian government will continue to search for realistic means of information sharing and multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the military industry.

However, India's transition to a cooperative strategy involves more than just combining military might. Military-civilian interaction is also essential. Just as much consideration should be given to military commands as to the establishment of a new government department under the Defence Ministry of New Delhi.

Concluding Remarks

Compared to last year's Defence Strategic Review, which only represented the subjective thoughts of a few consultants rather than the deliberate assessment of the Defence Department, the NDS is a far more thorough and sophisticated document. Nevertheless, the NDS is more potent at the tactical than the strategic level. Since Australia is working on strengthening its partnerships with other like-minded countries, the Quad may become less focused on conventional physical security issues due to India's objections. As a result, there's a chance that Australia, Japan, and the US, who are among India's allies, will be encouraged to explore alternative regional agreements that better meet their security needs. This increases the possibility that the Quad will eventually lose its usefulness and turn into a talk show, while India's other Quad partners look elsewhere.

Compared to India, several of Australia's other alliances are gaining more traction. This might be primarily due to New Delhi's continued resistance to exploring the kinds of security alliances that Australia's other allies are open to, but it does highlight some issues for the relationship's future.

Nevertheless, Australia is committed to reinforcing India's strategic position in the region by expanding the scope and intricacy of its defence cooperation. The Australian government will continue to search for realistic means of information sharing and multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the military industry. Australia is the best friend and partner India needs to address both the opportunities and challenges of the present and the future, as the strategic environment heads toward greater uncertainty.

Notes:

¹ "2024 Australian National Defense Strategy", USNI News, April 17, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/04/17/2024-australian-national-defense-strategy>. Accessed on April 29, 2024.

² Ibid.

³ Daniel Hurst, "Plans for New Fighter Jets on Back Burner Despite Labor's \$50bn Boost to Defence Spending", *The Guardian*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/17/labor-government-defence-military-budget-increase-spending-adf>. Accessed on April 29, 2024.

⁴ Dinakar Peri, "India is a Top-Tier Security Partner, says Australia's New National Defence Strategy", *The Hindu*, April 21, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-is-a-top-tier-security-partner-says-australias-new-national-defence-strategy/article68091354.ece>. Accessed on April 30, 2024.

⁵ Gordon Arthur, “Australia Targets Major Spending Boost for Asia-Pacific Defense”, *Defence News*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2024/04/18/australia-targets-major-spending-boost-for-asia-pacific-defense/>. Accessed on April 30, 2024.

⁶ General Angus Campbell, “The India-Australia Defence and Security Partnership in 2024 and Beyond”, Observer Research Foundation, February 23, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-india-australia-defence-and-security-partnership-in-2024-and-beyond>. Accessed on May 01, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “India and Australia Sign Deal to Use Each Other’s Military Bases”, *Al Jazeera*, June 04, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/4/india-and-australia-sign-deal-to-use-each-others-military-bases>. Accessed on May 01, 2024.

⁹ Franz-Stefan Gady, “India’s Air Force to Participate in Australia’s ‘Pitch Black’ Air Combat Exercise”, *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/indias-air-force-to-participate-in-australias-pitch-black-air-combat-exercise/>. Accessed on May 01, 2024.

¹⁰ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India’s Place in Australia’s National Defense Strategy 2024”, *The Diplomat*, April 22, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/indias-place-in-australias-national-defense-strategy-2024/>. Accessed on April 30, 2024.

¹¹ Mick Ryan, “As Warfare Changes, so does Australian Strategy”, Lowy Institute, April 23, 2024, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/warfare-changes-so-does-australian-strategy>. Accessed on April 30, 2024.

¹² Kim Heriot-Darragh, “What India’s Defence Reforms Mean for Australia—and India”, *The Strategist*, April 04, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-indias-defence-reforms-mean-for-australia-and-india/>. Accessed on May 01, 2024.

¹³ Ibid.



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 Vice Marshal Anil Golani (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Khyati Singh and Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.