

# AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY THROUGH THE LENS OF INDIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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## INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

The National Defence Strategy lays the foundation for the government's strategic decisions that will direct the major and

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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.

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 growing strategic competition between the US and China, significant wars in Europe and the Middle East, China's massive arms build-up, and the persistent tensions in the South China Sea and over Taiwan.

### **STRATEGY OF DENIAL**

A strategy of denial will serve as the main pillar of the defence strategy under the National Defence Strategy.<sup>2</sup> 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.

The Integrated Investment Programme 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 over 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.<sup>3</sup> The government has decided to prioritise and finance the acquisition of critical capabilities to strengthen Australia's deterrence capabilities while rebuilding the Integrated Investment Programme.

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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.

Furthermore, the defence workforce strategies need to adapt as the ADF becomes a more cohesive and focussed 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 as well as the UK under the auspices of Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS).

### **INDO-PACIFIC REGION AND INDIAN OCEAN**

Australia sees the Indo-Pacific region as vital to national security. Canberra's main concern is the growing US-China competition, as China's aggression is perceived as a danger to the stability of the area. Australia places a high priority on stability and order based on laws. This is accomplished by relationships with the Southeast Asian nations, Japan, India, and Australia, as well as a sophisticated military that includes nuclear-powered submarines (through the AUKUS construct). For Australia to remain the preferred security partner for the Pacific Islands and to prevent aggression, transparency and regional cooperation are essential. The Indian and Japanese concepts of a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific are not specifically mentioned in the Australian statement, which emphasises collective security in the Indo-Pacific.

However, the NDS-2024 designates Japan as an "indispensable partner" for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, acknowledging its critical role in regional security. This solid connection, which enables close cooperation on several fronts, is based on common

post-World War II ideals and interests. Australia prioritises trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan because it believes that this promotes coordinated action and interoperability. The NDS-2024 places a strong emphasis on enhancing cooperation on defence innovation and technology while fortifying strategic ties with Japan through discussions on prospective conflicts.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Australia supports greater Japanese participation in military initiatives within Australia and aims to achieve “high-end interoperability” with Japan’s Self-Defence Forces across several domains. This emphasis on a broad collaboration with Japan demonstrates Australia’s aim to forge a unified front in the region to confront security issues.

India can, and ought to, take advantage of the current trilateral partnership among Australia, India, and Japan, with a focus on supply chain resilience collaboration.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, New Delhi can use this trilateral framework to advance India’s own goal of advancing, safeguarding, and guaranteeing the security of its coastal and international seaborne trade, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and the vital port infrastructure that supports these trade routes.

India can further its goals in the Indian Ocean by working with Australia and other regional partners that have similar goals. When Canberra and New Delhi work together, they can also more effectively contribute to a more stable and secure Indo-Pacific.

Australia is on high alert due to the growing competition for influence in the Indian Ocean, particularly with regard to the control of critical ports and sea lanes. The NDS-2024 highlights the importance of regional stability and acknowledges the Indian Ocean’s vital role in Australia’s security. Australia puts collaboration first in order to do this. Through frequent military deployments, training exercises, and intelligence sharing, Australia aims to dramatically expand defence ties with India. This collaboration also extends to the neighbouring

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4. Michael Pezzullo, “The Long Arc of Australian Defence Strategy”, *The Strategist*, ASPI, May 11, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-long-arc-of-australian-defence-strategy/>. Accessed on May 12, 2024.
  5. Shino Watanabe, “Australia-India-Japan Trilateral Cooperation for Strengthening Supply Chain Resilience”, *Griffith Asia Insights*, May 23, 2022, <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/australia-india-japan-trilateral-cooperation-for-strengthening-supply-chain-resilience/>. Accessed on May 10, 2024.

Indian Ocean states including Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Australia seeks to protect both its own strategic interests and the stability of the Indian Ocean by putting a high priority on regional cooperation and forming solid alliances based on openness.

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 (NDS), 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.<sup>6</sup> Australia would strengthen defence cooperation to support India's important role in the region. It will look for ways to promote information sharing, business collaboration in the defence sector, and bilateral and multilateral cooperation with India.

The national defence policy aims to strengthen the ADF's war-fighting 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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6. 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.

7. 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.

than half of its seaborne exports depart from ports in the region.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (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 one another's military sites for logistical support when they signed the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) in 2020.<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

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8. 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 1, 2024.

9. Ibid.

10. "India and Australia Sign Deal to Use Each Other's Military Bases", *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/4/india-and-australia-sign-deal-to-use-each-others-military-bases>. Accessed on May 1, 2024.

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 (RAAF) and the Indian Air Force (IAF) 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, practise battle tactics, and engage in challenging aerial manoeuvres.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, strong interpersonal ties between Australia's 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. One 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 programme and 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 Zealand, Japan, our partners in Southeast Asia and the Pacific family, the Republic of Korea, India as well as the UK and other

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11. 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 1, 2024.

European nations that share our concerns” in the light of the ongoing deterioration of the strategic environment and the “competition [that] is playing out in military and non-military ways.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

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12. 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.

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



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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.

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.

## CONCLUSION

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.

Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy essentially places a high priority on deterrence through alliances and military modernisation. This strategy ignores the conflict that exists between Australia's strong economic ties to Beijing and its efforts to counter China's influence, even as it works to strengthen Australia's defence (and regional security) through cooperation with the US, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. Until the increased fleet is completely operational, restrictions in shipbuilding capacity could result in a potential gap in capabilities. Nonetheless, India's agreement with Australia's vision for a secure Indo-Pacific creates opportunities for

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14. Kim Heriot-Darragh, "What India's Defence Reforms Mean for Australia—and India", *The Strategist*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-indias-defence-reforms-mean-for-australia-and-india/>. Accessed on May 1, 2024.

15. *Ibid.*

cooperation in the areas of defence infrastructure, maritime security, de-risking of current supply chains, and the development of new ones. India and Australia have the potential to create a strong alliance that protects a safe and prosperous Indo-Pacific by making use of these prospects and promoting a cooperative regional order founded on comity.

Since Australia is working on strengthening its partnerships with other like-minded countries, the QUAD may become less focussed on conventional physical security issues due to India's objections. As a result, there is a chance that Australia, Japan, and the US, that 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 and India needs to address both the opportunities and challenges of the present and the future, as the strategic environment heads toward greater uncertainty.