

The era of the Indo-Pacific

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When the haunting music of the Australian Aboriginal instrument the didgeridoo rings out tonight across New Delhi's Purana Qila, it will mark a turning point in India's relations with the land Down Under.

For this week's visit to India by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard carries an important message, symbolised in a concert combining the musical traditions of both countries.

India and Australia are now ready to recast their relations beyond what has for too long divided them, notably the strife over students and uranium.

Instead, they have a chance to define their ties as a wide-ranging partnership for the looming era of the Indo-Pacific, in which the prosperity and security of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are becoming entwined.

Despite all their obvious differences, these two Indian Ocean democracies now have all the elements for a future of mutual benefit, spanning trade, investment, education, science, environmental management, security and the shaping of Asia's strategic order.

When they meet, Manmohan Singh and Julia Gillard can briefly look away from their domestic political woes. (Gillard, too, has a precarious government with no parliamentary majority to speak of.) Instead, they can take some satisfaction from the reinvention of a bilateral relationship that until recently was struggling to find political and societal trust.

Australia's first female prime minister deserves particular credit for this outcome, thanks to her determination last December in staring down the left wing of her Labor party to end a decades-old ban on uranium sales to India.

This removed a major obstacle to goodwill. Now Delhi's policy establishment can look with fresh eyes at the opportunities Australia offers as a collaborator in areas ranging across energy, services, infrastructure, food and water security, as well as in diplomacy and defence.

Admittedly, Labor's uranium u-turn is yet to translate into exports, and this will rightly require a safeguards agreement to the standards Canberra requires of all its many civilian nuclear customers, from Europe to China. The start of safeguards negotiations will likely be among Gillard's announcements in Delhi.

But Australia should mean much more to India than uranium. Coal dominates the energy relationship, with Indian investment recognising the coalfields of Queensland as critical to India's electricity needs in the decades ahead. And there is scope to expand the place of natural gas and renewables in the mix.

Gillard is bringing with her some of Australia's top CEOs, for a forum with Indian corporate leaders on ways to deepen and diversify business ties.

After uranium, the great controversy that has harmed Australia-India links has been about the safety and welfare of Indian students.

In 2009 and 2010, crimes against a small number of the more than one lakh Indian students Down Under led to Australia being maligned as racist and dangerous in parts of the Indian media.

The criticism was greatly overblown but the damage was done. Yet there was at least one silver lining. The trouble led to soul-searching and changes in Australian education, immigration and even policing.

An overhaul of visa rules may have caused short-term pain but is heralding a more sustainable education relationship, focused on a flow of genuine students, with the infrastructure in place to take better care of them on arrival.

A sign of the times is how quickly Bollywood has moved on, with a recent film called *From Sydney with Love* being set on the stylish campus of the University of New South Wales, and not a street crime in sight.

All the angst over students and uranium has done what no amount of cricketing or Commonwealth heritage could ever do — it has got the political class in both countries paying attention to the full potential of the relationship.

India has become one of Australia's top four trade partners. Indian migrants constitute one of the largest, fastest-growing and most enterprising communities in Australia's richly multicultural society.

For its part, India is taking renewed interest in how Australia's development might have insights for its own enormous challenges. Australia, for example, has experience in water management and agriculture on an arid continent.

Turning to hard security, these two multi-ethnic democracies share many interests and challenges.

Both are enemies of terrorism and jihadist ideology. Gillard has just been to Indonesia to mark the 10th anniversary of the Bali bombings in which 88 Australians died. Australians also died in Mumbai in 2008. Australian troops continue to fight — and fall — in Afghanistan.

For its part, India would benefit from recognising Australia's worth as a security partner. This is not only against terrorism — where Australian intelligence insights and special forces expertise could be of real value — but in maintaining stability across the wider Indo-Pacific region.

The Australian and Indian navies are logical partners in the Indian Ocean especially, but may need a clearer political signal to begin making this relationship a priority, for instance, through regular bilateral exercises.

There is also no reason why these two maritime nations cannot in time coordinate with third countries on issues of mutual interest, from surveillance to disaster relief.

Depending on the issue, those efforts might involve Indonesia, Japan, the United States, China or others. It would be logical for India to be among the countries with which Australian forces and the US Marines now training out of Australia's Northern Territory might one day exercise.

All this will raise the predictable claims of "containing" China. But Australia and India would be ill-served by such a one-dimensional Cold War strategy. Each has deep economic ties with China, and is making efforts at wider dialogue and cooperation.

Indeed, there is much scope for India and Australia to work together in inclusive diplomatic institutions, from the East Asia Summit to the G-20, which Australia will chair in 2014.

That didgeridoo music from the ramparts of Delhi's Old Fort will be a sonorous reminder that India and Australia are now well into the sustained work of building a partnership fit for their shared geography and converging interests.

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