

A new maturity in Australia-India ties

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For a sign that Australia's future in Asia is about more than China, look no further than this week's visit to India by Julia Gillard.

It has every chance of being remembered as the moment when two democracies became serious about a shared vision of partnership, economically, strategically and at the level of society.

This suits what is shaping up as a new Indo-Pacific era in which the economic and strategic fates of the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region are becoming interlinked.

And it is neatly timed, ahead of the release of the Australian government's much-anticipated white paper setting out a strategy for the so-called Asian Century.

To be sure, Australia and India are two very different countries, and their relationship will continue to be a long and often frustrating game.

But it is entering a new and positive phase, where the headlines can thankfully move beyond forlorn Indian students and forbidden Australian uranium.

This is partly because of the re-making of Australia's international education policies and infrastructure in the past three years, after an industry that had grown too far, too fast collided with the Indian media juggernaut in a public relations disaster about alleged racism and student safety.

But the lift in Australia-India relations also owes much to the Prime Minister's courage and common sense in confronting the Labor Party's outdated ban on civilian uranium sales to India.

Last December, she led the pragmatists in her party to overturn a policy that had prevented Canberra from even talking to the Indians about selling Australian uranium for energy needs.

This removed an obstacle of political mistrust that was blocking wider co-operation in bilateral relations. Admittedly, it ended a needless problem of Labor's own making, given that John Howard's government had already reached the same point five years ago.

Nor does it mean uranium sales will begin soon: they will require a safeguards agreement, which has been slow in emerging. And if India proves unwilling to accept Australia's standard safeguards conditions as required of China, Russia and others, then no sales would or should proceed.

At best, Gillard and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh may be expected to announce the start of safeguards negotiations.

But there is no need to expect breakthrough agreements or soaring rhetoric from this visit. The colour and movement can safely be left for the cultural side of things; the trip includes an Australian cultural spectacular at one of Delhi's grand old forts.

Instead, Gillard and Singh can measure their success by how far they get in serious strategic conversation and by the complexity and businesslike, down-to-earth quality of much of their agenda.

Despite its recent economic and political stumbles, a rising India continues to hold vast potential for Australia's prosperity. India is vying with South Korea for third place among Australia's export markets. Coal, gold, copper and education dominate these economic links.

And while Australian coal is becoming a substantial part of India's energy security, Indian investment is underwriting much of Australia's future coal industry.

In food, water and environmental management, too, India is beginning to recognise that Australian experience and expertise have much to offer.

On the security front, the Prime Minister's transit from Bali to Delhi is a sombre reminder of shared interests and shared tragedies. In Mumbai in 2008, Australians were targeted alongside Indians; and in Afghanistan Australia's commitment has broadly helped India's security in the world's most dangerous neighbourhood. For its part, India would benefit from recognising Australia's value as a security partner, not only against terrorism but in maintaining stability across the wider commons of a shared Indo-Pacific region. This includes the critical sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and into Southeast Asia.

India will be an indispensable player in the evolving security order, not only in its Indian Ocean neighbourhood but also in a wider Asian system where many countries are concerned to ensure that Chinese power does not become destabilisingly dominant.

If Australia can advance the steady work of building strategic trust with India, there is no reason why these two maritime nations cannot in time co-ordinate with third countries on issues of mutual interest, from maritime surveillance to humanitarian assistance.

On different issues, these efforts might involve Indonesia, Japan, the US, China or others. It would be logical for India to be among the countries with which Australian forces and the US marines training out of Darwin might one day exercise.

All this will raise the predictable claim that Australia-India strategic ties are really just about some American ploy to encircle or "contain" China.

But Australia and India would be equally ill-served by such a one-dimensional Cold War strategy, which is why their real diplomacy is more sophisticated. Each has deep economic ties with China, and is making efforts at wider dialogue and co-operation.

For its part, Beijing should see the new maturity in Australia-India ties as part of a context of natural interdependence that can be good for the stability and development of the Indo-Pacific region we all share.

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