

It's a natural alliance

Rory Medcalf
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Australia and India are natural partners. So it is frustrating that the relationship continues to fall short of a truly strategic partnership in which each country contributes greatly to the other's resilience and strength. Our nations are multicultural democracies facing shared hopes and challenges in the Asian century. The new India's human capital, growth and buzzing spirit of enterprise are a perfect match for Australia's unique combination of resources, development and proximity. We are neighbours in the Indian Ocean.

What keeps us apart these days is a mix of flawed policy and flawed perception, especially on the vexed issues of student welfare and uranium. Australia is making a big effort to build the relationship, with expanded diplomatic representation, high-level visits, efforts to build defence ties and commitment to a free trade agreement. The recent visit by trade minister Simon Crean - one of India's best friends in the Australian cabinet - is further proof of this.

But Canberra is constrained by old-fashioned and ideological thinking in parts of the Australian Labour Party, which prevents the sale of uranium to India for civilian purposes an area where Australia could have led the world. That is a policy that desperately needs to change, as I believe it will within about 12 months. The Labour Party needs to gain a contemporary understanding of India as part of the solution on non-proliferation and other global strategic challenges. India's democratic and developmental mission led by Manmohan Singh and new-generation leaders such as Rahul Gandhi is surely in step with the basic Labour value of maximising human welfare.

Sadly, Australia-India relations have also been harmed by the unexpected fallout of an education relationship that grew too far, too fast in the wrong directions, plus the exaggerated negative coverage in some parts of India's hyper-competitive mass media. But the difficulties are not solely on Canberra's side. I fear the relationship is also being held back in parts of what one might describe as Old India including some quarters of the bureaucracy where there remain outdated, stereotyped attitudes about Australia's and India's own places in the world.

So the private sector needs to lead. India is Australia's fastest growing large trade partner: two-way trade has grown a staggering tenfold in the last decade, and our exports last year grew 50 per cent. Australia's coal, gas, copper, gold, education and other service industries all drive the development India needs.

At the human level, the potential is also great. Australia and India are nations that can do much to help each other meet the shared challenge of shaping the kind of globally-minded, innovative and adaptive citizens any nation needs to prosper in this era. There are many Indians and Australians of great goodwill towards each other, fascinated with each other's societies, and willing to work hard to build a strategic friendship. These stories are beginning to come out. Indeed, Australia's very first novelist, John Lang, was a great friend of India in the 19th century, a crusading newspaperman and lawyer who stood up to the East India Company on behalf of notable Indians such as the Rani of Jhansi.

Now is the time for a new generation of entrepreneurial, open-minded citizens of both our democratic countries to take the time and trouble to build their own creative links across the Indian Ocean. First up, we have some hard work to do. The finding of a new opinion poll by the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, shows that almost three quarters of Australians believe that violence against students has damaged Australia-India relations.

The nationally representative survey of 1,001 adult Australians was made in March 2010, and follows almost a year of media attention on the problems facing some Indian students in Australia, including vulnerability to criminal violence and the poor quality of some vocational

courses. The fact that 74 per cent of Australians perceive real diplomatic damage underlines the need for Canberra to sustain exceptional efforts to repair Australia's reputation in India. The good news is that those figures also suggest that most Australians are worried that we think the relationship matters and should be repaired.

Of course, the causes of the violence were much more complex than the racism that some Indian media reports have alleged. Canberra needs to clear the air, by releasing as soon as possible the findings of a criminological study into what actually happened, especially in Victoria. But one silver lining from the crisis over student welfare is a recognition by the Australian and Indian governments that they needed to treat the relationship as a priority.

Australia is more than just another middle power lining up for a chunk of India's future. Australia's hybrid character offers India a singular combination of qualities as a collaborator. It has vast resources, a developed economy and democratic polity. It is partly western yet also an Asian and Indian Ocean neighbour. It is allied with America yet has independent military and intelligence clout. It has democratic stability alongside population growth and multiculturalism. It has the same security uncertainties as India, including about terrorism and growing Chinese power. The potential for each of our democratic nations to help the other is huge. It is a catch we cannot afford to drop.

The writer is a programme director at the Lowy Institute, Australia.