India – Australia relations in the context of China’s rise

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Abstract: This article analyzes the India–Australia relationship within the challenged context of the US–China rivalry and of the rise of China. The details of this bilateral relationship need to be focused for analyzing cooperation trends and common national interests of the two countries. This paper will apply various theoretical perspectives of international studies for examining the empirical data from official declarations, policies of the two countries and academic research studies directly related to the India–Australia relationship. The hypothesis of this research is that the Indo-Pacific regional structuralization and great powers’...
rivalries would lead to the context in which the regional power competition and new regional institutions establishment would promote the common strategic interests and balancing policies between the US and China of the two countries. Therefore, the bilateral relationship between India and Australia would have opportunities for further development in the future.

**Subjects:** International Political Economy; International Relations; Security Studies - Pol & Intl Relns

**Keywords:** India–Australia relations; Comprehensive strategic partnership; U.S-China competition; The rise of China; National interests

1. Introduction

The India–Australia relationship has been developing since 1780, mainly through commercial activities. The relationship has been friendly, given shared values from Commonwealth traditions. In the military field, the two countries cooperated in campaigns during the two world wars. India also received much support from Australia during the independence movement and the 1963 Sino-Indian war. In 1941, the Indian Chamber of Commerce was opened in Sydney, marking a turning point in the diplomatic relationship. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru identified Australia as an important factor for India’s development and security. As a condition for India’s reaching into the Pacific, India invited Australia to participate in the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 by India (High Commission of India, 2019).

However, India–Australia relations tended to decline during the 1950s and 1960s due to the different views of Jawaharlal Nehru and Robert Menzies on interests and ideologies (Gurry, 1992, pp. 510–26). Australia was consistent in establishing a security alliance with the US and was bound by security regimes, such as ANZUS and SEATO. Meanwhile, India pursued a policy of non-alignment-defending the nation’s territorial integrity and fighting against major powers’ influence on regional affairs. In addition, India’s skepticism towards Australia over the Kashmir issue, ethnic issues, lack of mutual support at the 1960 United Nations conference, etc. also made it difficult for the two countries to find a common voice.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made significant changes in the post-Cold war era. India faced internal and external challenges in terms of economics and politics. Foreign policy adjustment has been a critical requirement for adapting to the new order, including the decision to restructure India’s economy to create an open and diversified market. Consequently, the India–Australia relationship has gradually changed in a positive direction. The change took place first in the economic sector with new initiatives, such as the Australia–India Council (1992), the New Vision for India–Australia (1996), aiming to enhance relations between the two countries. From 2000 to 2009, India became Australia’s 10th largest trading partner and Australia’s 5th largest export market (Grar, 2014b). Economic coherence has also boosted the security ties between the two countries. Since 2008, Australia and India have held high-level dialogue security meetings and established ministerial dialogue frameworks to advance bilateral agendas.

The India–Australia relationship is yet to demonstrate a high level of commitment as coordinative activities, exchange and maritime support are at a low level. The two sides have not yet considered each other as important partners. Another obstacle for this relationship was that Australia was still at odds with India’s nuclear development program (David, 2012, p. 122). However, given the escalating US–China competition and the rise of China, India and Australia share commonalities in terms of both immediate and strategic interests. In June 2020, India and Australia elevated their ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership, thus opening up opportunities for enhancing the bilateral relationship.
2. Literature review
There have been many publications discussing the India–Australia relationship.

Panda and Baruah (2010) delivered a comprehensive view on the India–Australia strategic relationship. The comprehensiveness of the study has been proved by the stretch of history and cooperative activities between the two countries. Historically, this relationship has had ups and downs, but in general, the relationship had been significant for their current archivements. Common strategic interests have been examined by various aspects of cooperation, such as defense, terrorism, nuclear and disarmament, energy security, and economic linkages (Panda & Baruah, 2010).

The paper written by Priya Chacko and Alexander (2017) aimed to explain whether the relationship is natural while being considered neglected. Liberalism has been applied to explain the behaviors of both countries in different cases, such as the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the Crimea issue, and the rise of China. These scholars have concluded on the differences in liberal construction of India’s polycentric idea and Australia’s hegemonic stability view. Diplomats may frequently mention the shared values, liberalism, democracy, or history of colonialism, but the reality of this relationship may often arrive at different expectations (Priya Chacko & Alexander, 2017).

Regarding the India–Australia relationship, Rahul Mishra (2012) paid attention to geopolitics and economic incentives. One of the main reasons that brought the two countries closer is a reciprocal relationship on uranium business (Mishra, 2012, p. 658). The commentary has mentioned opportunities for enhancing the relationship, like the realization of the importance of the Indian Ocean and the rise of China—major factors for the bilateral security and defense plans (Mishra, 2012, p. 660).

Sundaramurthy and Asha Sundaramurthy (2020) studied the China factor in the maritime cooperation. The scholar stated that China played as an important factor facilitating the bilateral relationship. The uncertainties of China’s rise have impacted on the growth of maritime and defense cooperation between India and Australia compared to other aspects of the relationship. (Sundaramurthy & Asha Sundaramurthy, 2020). OmPrakash Dahiya (2013) also investigated the role of China—a trading partner for both countries. Economic relations with China have been far outweighed by that of India’s and Australia’s (OmPrakash Dahiya, 2013, p. 75). Moreover, the study also mentioned the important roles of the US in multilateral form, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue considered by China as an Asian NATO (OmPrakash Dahiya, 2013, p. 72). The role of the US and China has also been mentioned by Gopal and Ahlawat (2015) in their study on Australia–India Strategic relations. Both Australia and China seek to develop strong economic relations with China while considering the rise of China as a geostrategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific region and the US as a protective shield (Gopal & Ahlawat, 2015, p. 216).

3. Factors driving India–Australia relations in the recent years
There are positive changes in the India–Australia relationship, and three main factors that have contributed to this trajectory are as follows: the escalation of US–China competition, China’s rise and threat to India’s and Australia’s national interests, and commonalities in the foreign policy of India and China.

3.1. The escalating of US–China competition
A great-power competition between the two major powers, the United States, the dominant power that currently stays at the top of the power hierarchy, and China, a rising power and the US “most powerful rival” (Le Miere, 2020) with the ambition to change the status quo, has become intense and hard to predict. The rise of China and its ambition to wield more power in Asia have been enduring challenges to regional peace and security. China’s growing assertiveness, with its escalating unilateral actions, has pushed US–China relations toward a scenario of “hot peace”, keeping
tensions high but without war and disastrous consequences. However, the danger of military conflicts between Washington and Beijing cannot be ruled out due to mutual skepticism about each other’s intentions, and the lack of effective mechanisms to solve disputes and destabilize arms race in the Indo-Pacific. The escalation of tensions took place in various fields, such as diplomacy, economics, military, as well as technopolitical and ideological influence.

Due to the rivalry between the United States and China, the international system is likely to become a more complicated structure, with emerging powers striving for more influence and power, middle powers forming new alignment frameworks, and regional organizations learning to accommodate the Sino-US competition. Sino-US strategic discussions have recently failed to engage the two major powers in sincere and meaningful dialogues and exchanges. These discussions even fuel tensions and mistrust between the United States and China and dismiss cooperative measures to solve complicated issues, prompting the gradual deterioration in the broader US–China bilateral relationship (Patricia, 2021).

Unlike the Obama years, the United States under then Trump and the incumbent Biden administration has become determined to push back China’s expanding influence and ambitions, especially its “wolf warrior” diplomacy aimed to defend China’s national interests and forge its national honor. The Biden administration has criticized China’s aggressive behavior in the East and South China seas, the Taiwan Strait, and Beijing’s economic coercive actions over Washington’s allies. The rebirth of the quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad) with the aim of containing China’s rise has further made US–China competition pressing security for regional countries. Across the Indo-Pacific, the United States has a more diplomatic and security influence than China, and Washington has sought to consolidate its power by forging new arrangements, notably AUKUS—the newly formed trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

In China’s media, nationalistic sayings, like “East Rising, West Declining” (Rudd, 2021), has been repeated by Chinese leaders, claiming that this era is the beginning of China’s rejuvenation. Unlike previous Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping has embraced a strong-man leadership to pursue China’s ambition of gaining deeper influence globally. Chinese leaders have accused the United States of interfering in China’s internal affairs and blamed Washington for “lecturing other countries on how to behave while not being able to put its own house in order” (Tran, 2021). While focusing on domestic priorities, China is expanding its influence overseas, given its expanding economic reach and growing strategic weight (Hass, 2021). Now China’s nimble diplomacy has earned China the upper hand over the United States regionally, especially in Southeast Asia, where China has poured capital to win the hearts and minds of regional smaller countries.

With the introduction and implementation of the “Free and Open Indo—Pacific” (FOIP) strategy, the US is thought to be gradually pivoting towards Southern Asia by tightening security ties with India, the second most populous country. If FOIP is cast as a tool for the US and its allies to counter and encircle China, FOIP would likely provoke the Chinese government for a stronger reaction. This will soon result in the rising level of political conflicts and even military tensions in the region. A similar scenario did happen with the Obama administration’s “Pivot and Rebalance towards Asia” (Pham Hoang Tu Linh, 2018).

Nevertheless, the possibility of an uncontrolled conflict between the US and China remains low, at least for the near future due to the needs of cooperating and friendly competition with the other two countries. Chinese officials have recognized that the US has military superiority and this will remain in the next few decades. Moreover, China needs market and technology, as well as business management skills from the US for her strategies in becoming a developed country.

Regarding the US, countering China via the FOIP strategy is facing many challenges. Despite the US’ announcement of support for the FOIP, its policies outlined in this initiative are insignificant to
general observers due to President Trump’s instinct and his instinctive behaviors. Trump’s “American first” approach in terms of trade (withdrawing from CPTPP, triggering trade war with China), missing meetings with key partners and skepticism towards allies (especially in terms of sharing military fees) have reduced the coherence of strategies and policies that the US is pursuing (Harding, 2019). Besides, the US and China’s markets are heavily relying on each other, while China is the largest economic partner of many Asian countries (including US allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia). Therefore, countering China may be costly, but ineffective. FOIP’s probability of success depends primarily on building a sustainable and built-on-trust alliance network (Arase, 2019).

Regarding China, FOIP could worsen the international community’s view of China’s “Belt and Road”. Many US leaders have publicly criticized China for using “Debt-trap diplomacy” in order to expand its sphere of influence. They believe that China is providing loans for infrastructure projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America since eligibility lacks transparency, and revenues mostly flow back to China. Conversely, the US reaffirms that “the US will offer a higher-quality choice without pushing our partners into default, losing their autonomy, we are not providing a “belt of binding” or “unilateral road” (Liu Feitao, 2019). FOIP can also increase political issues when China and other countries implement cooperation projects under BRI. This is because other regional countries will consider with caution how the US responds when they decide to join Beijing’s BRI.

On the other hand, the simultaneous presence of China’s BRI and US’s FOIP may intensify strategic competition between the two major powers, which can put the region under pressure, and at the expense of all parties. Accordingly, direct confrontation can happen at some geopolitical hotspots such as South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan and the North Korean peninsula. Additionally, the competition between Beijing’s BRI and Washington’s FOIP will continuously cause the regional countries sliding into an accelerating arms race (Liu Feitao, 2019).

FOIP strategy can also increase hesitation among China’s neighboring countries and other developing countries in the region in making choices or balancing with the US and China. Since the financial crisis in 2008 up to now, China has been rising as the impetus for both Asia and the world’s economic growth, with its international status and influence in the region has significantly increased. After gaining office, President Trump followed the principle of “America first” and applied a series of unilateral policies, which affected the US relations with its Indo-Pacific allies, although there are some regional countries that relied on their close ties with the US to ensure their security. This fact makes it even more difficult for regional countries to find a way for balancing their relations with Washington and Beijing, including India and Australia.

3.2. China’s rise and threat to India’s and Australia’s national interests

During the 2000s, China continued its development strategy with a focus on taking advantage of all chances to advance its status in the US-led international system and prevent the formation of anti-China coalitions (Goldstein, 2005). However, since Xi Jinping took office in 2013, China has made some adjustments to its development strategy. China has been more active in dealing with challenges and pressure from the US and US-led alliances. One of the adjustments was to build and promote strategic and comprehensive relations with other countries to gain support and mitigate risks from these countries during China’s developing process. Moreover, adjustment in China’s foreign policy has shown that China is being more proactive in dealing with security issues and strategies that have far-reaching impacts on China’s development. The proactivity was revealed in its Neighborhood diplomacy.

In particular, China emphasized that an overall layout of diplomacy as “promoting relations with neighboring countries is at top priority, promoting relations with major powers is a core task, promoting relations with developing countries is the basis, multilateral diplomacy is a playground.” This policy serves as a way to adjust to the changing environment, create a more stable
surrounding area for its development objectives (Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa và Tran Thi Hai Yen, 2020). Thanks to the launching of Belt and Road initiatives at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, China's economic and political influence has risen significantly. From a country with an economic size of only 12.6% of the size of the US economy in 2001, by the end of 2021, China's economic size is equivalent to 77% of the size of the world's largest economy. In 2010, China replaced Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. Regarding defense, while the USA's spending decreased by 17%, that of China in the period 2009–2018 increased to 83% (European Commission, World military expenditure and weapons trade)—the highest increase compared to other top countries for military spending. Since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century until now, China has always been the second largest defense spender in the world and the gap with the US is increasingly narrowing.

China's expansionist ambition has been concretized with the “String of Pearls Strategy” and the “Belt-Road Initiative”, aiming to establish six economic corridors linking China with Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and South Asia on land, connecting the maritime route stretching from Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. There have been approximately 1,700 infrastructure projects deployed in the period 2013–2017 (Wu gang, 2017). The goal of this initiative is to provide public goods—the launching pad for China to become a hegemon in Eurasia continent. China has lent amount of money to invest in the construction of infrastructure, harbors, and airports of involved countries. In the Indo-Pacific region, China's maritime ambition has influenced regional countries, including Australia and India.

In the Indo region, Australia is considered as one of the most active members of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The 2009 Australian Defense White Paper mentioned that “the Indo-Pacific region will play a more important and strategic role up to 2030, and become a trading region that has growing importance globally, especially to supply energy between Asia and the Middle East” (Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2009). However, this document did not mention countering China's rise. The 2013 Australian Defense White Book emphasized more strongly the importance of US–China relations in shaping strategic Indo-Pacific environment and suggested that ensuring the Indo-Pacific system, including the maritime environment, must be the top priority (Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2013). Subsequently, the 2016 Australian Defense White Book highlighted the need to maintain a rule-based order, thereby promoting the mutual prosperity for the Indo-Pacific; highlighted Canberra's interest in having opening connection with trading partners, not allowing the use of force and asserted that threats could be managed through discussion and negotiation on the basis of law. Notably, the 2016 National Defense White Paper covered in more depth the rise of China's national power, including military modernization that would have a major impact on stability in the Indo-Pacific region by 2035. Australia also stressed that China should have provided reassurance to its neighbors through a greater transparent defense policy (Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2016).

Australia's perspective towards the Indo-Pacific region was also presented in The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper; accordingly, Australia admitted that the international environment was witnessing quick changes, discussing challenges arising from China's rise, especially in the South China Sea (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, 2017). As major powers impose their will on small countries, they can spark anger among the disadvantaged groups towards unfair agreements that are imposing on them (John Lee, 2019). Australia pointed out the need to shape the region in the alignment of democracies, which serves Canberra's interests and commitment to international rules-based institutions. In addition to its concerns about China's rise, Australia expressed growing uncertainty about the US under the presidency of Trump and the need for the Australia–US alliance to be tied to broader regional partnerships and smaller groups and associations. In particular, Australia viewed India as a key country that would emerge in the long term and positioned New Delhi as the heart of the diplomatic network. At the
same time, Australia pursued and implemented a policy of maintaining the unity and centrality of ASEAN (Marie Izuyama & Yusuke Ishihara, 2019).

Meanwhile, China’s increasing influence and presence in the Indian Ocean has created a South Asian “encirclement” aimed to isolate India. China has built, controlled and militarized strategic harbors locating on the East Sea's maritime routes, passed through the Indian Ocean and extended its influence on Djibouti, Africa. There are important seaports, such as Hambantota port (Sri Lanka), the gateway to the Indian Ocean, and Gwadar port (Pakistan), the gateway to the Arabian Sea that paved the way for India’s trading activities to Africa. These ports play a vital role as strategic deep-water ports, which granted China advantages in the event of a dispute with India (Maria Abi-Habib, 2018). Moreover, the Coco port (Myanmar) would help China monitor the deployment activities of the US and Indian navies in the Bay of Bengal. The port of Marao (Maldives) Chittagong (Bangladesh) has also earned strategic advantages. The location of these military harbors affects India’s interests as well as its roles and activities in the Indian Ocean (Iskander Rehman, 2009).

China’s territorial disputes with South China Sea claimants also affect India’s development. Though India is not located in the sea, its interests are closely related to the region because the South China Sea is located on the arterial sea lane connecting the Pacific Ocean—Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca\(^1\) (Tran Quang Chau, 2018). On the land, Sino-Pakistan rapprochement poses economic and territorial challenges to India. Pakistan’s geographical position is an important junction between the land and maritime Silk Roads, which has further encircled India. In 2017, the governments of China and Pakistan cooperated to build the Diامر Basha dam and four others within the framework of the Indus River Cascade project, leading to the possibility of controlling the upstream of major rivers flowing into Indian plains (PTI, 2017). In May 2020, the Pakistani government continued to empower China to build hydroelectric dams at the disputed area between Pakistan and India.

The rise of China poses four major challenges for India, including India’s security with China, regional security, India’s economic and trade relations, and India’s partnerships in the global governance context (D. Jaishankar, 2019, p. 11). To counterbalance China, India has made a combination of efforts, including cooperation with the United States (especially in the area of security and military equipment transfer) and with other countries in the Quadruple strategy (Japan and Australia; Singh, 2019). India also focuses on developing partnerships with the ASEAN region, with a focus on Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia through bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation programmes (P. Chacko & Willis, 2018). Besides the United States, New Delhi’s deeper involvement in strategic issues of the Indo-Pacific region also received much support from ASEAN, Japan, and Australia in an effort to balance relations among major powers in the region. Along with external balance, India also performs internal balancing, including improving defense capacity, naval capacity, and building infrastructure along India’s borders.

### 3.3. Commonalities in the foreign policy of India and China

Essentially, India is tied to China in terms of security and economy. According to data from India, China was the largest trading partner of India, with a total value of about $87 billion during the period 2013–2018. China’s $12 trillion economy is more than five times that of India, allowing China to pressure India through the rapid deployment and expansion of military and economic activities (Avinash, 2017). Hence, India does not want to alienate China, but it does not want to witness an Asian political structure led by China. This dilemma situation was shared by India and Australia (Hong Phuc, 2020). Controlling China’s rise would help reduce security competition by encouraging transparency, fair—sustainable trade, and peaceful settlement of territorial disputes (D. Jaishankar, 2019, p. 30).

Given the policies that Australia and India have employed, the two countries share the following commonalities: First, despite being not located geographically in the South China Sea, both
Australia and India share interests concerning the regional stability. In 2020, Australia voiced concerns over the South China Sea security and said that China’s claims to the South China Sea have no legal basis, indicating that “The contest over the South China Sea may seem a step removed from Australia’s immediate national interests, but nothing could be further from the truth. What happens in the months and years ahead will be enormously consequential for Australia as a free and open, trade-exposed nation” (Massola, 2020). On its part, India has expressed concern about escalating tensions in the South China Sea. In 2020, India’s External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said incidents in the South China Sea that “erode trust” and expressed India’s stance that negotiations on the code of conduct in the South China Sea “should not be prejudicial to legitimate interests of third parties and should be fully consistent” with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS; S S Jaishankar, 2020). Hence, both sides’ policies are geared towards strengthening cooperation with ASEAN countries. Second, despite having different concerns about China, they do not want to confront China directly, and want to prevent China’s regional dominance (Grare, 2014a, pp. 11–5). Australia and India, instead of confronting China, have been working together under the Quad framework to uphold the security and prosperity in the region. Both countries have interests in embracing multilateral institutions to foster their cooperative activities without challenging China. Third, despite the increasing great-power competition, Australia and India share a common vision about a free and open Indo-Pacific region with respect to the rule of law and freedom of navigation, supported by the promotion of global and regional institutions. At the Fourth Raisina Dialogue held in January 2019, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne noted that despite increased competition, Australia and India have been sharing interests in ensuring peaceful development in the open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific, where the rights of all nations large and small are respected (Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 2020). In August 2021, India and Australia cooperated to send warships into the South China Sea on a two-month deployment to conduct exercises with navies of the United States, Japan, and Australia. India’s statement was clear on the purpose of the exercises, “The deployment of the Indian Navy ships seeks to underscore the operational reach, peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly countries towards ensuring good order in the maritime domain and to strengthen existing bonds between India and countries of the Indo Pacific” (Lendon, 2021).

4. Changes in India–Australia relations
Problems that India and Australia are facing, mostly coming from China, would lead to similarities and differences between the two countries. The main difference comes from the nature of the problem that each side is facing. For India, it is a matter of territory, security, and sovereignty, having deep roots in history. Meanwhile, for Australia, challenges are in the field of economics that has mostly appeared in the context of China’s rise. Because of these differences, in the past, both countries did not focus on enhancing bilateral relations. Now India and Australia are aware of the magnitude of the “China threat” as they both need to prevent the rise of a Sino-centric order. This view differs from the US, which has aimed to escalate tensions with China. India and Australia tend to focus on defending regional interests and holding back in a less confronting way. With the same goal in mind, the two countries share a common vision of establishing a multilateral order. In this context, the India–Australia relationship has made positive changes, opening prospects for bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

4.1. Bilateral co-operations
Since the 2010s, the cooperation between India and Australia has grown positively, thanks to the consensus in views on the world and regional security, the commitment to democracy, rule of law and the belief in human rights (Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 2015). Both countries have great opportunities in enhancing their relationship, especially in the context of China’s rise, the US–China growing tensions, the US’s role in the security field and China’s role in the economic field, and common concerns on the Indo-Pacific region.

4.1.1. Politics and diplomacy
In 2014, India and Australia signed the Framework for Security Cooperation during Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s visit to India, laying the leverage for enhancing defense capacity to
ensure maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. The cooperation framework covers maritime security, protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOC), regular bilateral exercises and periodic consultations from defense commanders from both countries (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2014). In addition, in 2014, there were two summit meetings, of which Australia welcomed Indian Prime Minister for the first time in 28 years since Rajiv Gandhi. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in the early stages of his taking power, also said that Australia would not be out of India's vision but at the heart of its strategy (Malhotra, 2014).

In addition, Australia and India have faced challenges brought by China, including challenges at sea. During Prime Minister Turnbull’s visit to India in April 2017, the two countries have confirmed, on the one hand, sharing common interests in ensuring maritime security and safety of sea lanes, on the other hand, emphasizing the importance of respecting the legal order at sea based on UNCLOS 1982, the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce, as well as the settlement of disputes at sea by peaceful means in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS (Department of Foreing Affairs and Trade, Government of India, 2017). In Australian perception, India plays a major role in Australia’s foreign policy in the region. The Australian Foreign Affairs White Paper 2017 affirms that in addition to the US playing the role of a stabilizing factor, Japan and India as major economies and military powers are playing a larger role in political and security issues in the Indo-Pacific. India and Japan have also been exerting influence to balance the regional influence (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, 2017). From a valued perspective, democracies in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan, Indonesia, India and South Korea are of prime importance to Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, 2017). In other words, India is important to Australia in terms of political, security and democratic values, and as a contributing factor in shaping order in the region. For its part, India encourages Australia’s growing role in promoting prosperity and shaping regional security (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, 2017). Although not playing a major role like Japan, Australia is also an important partner in India’s Look East/Act East Policy (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2014), at least from the perspective of the two democracies. The development of this relationship showcases a strong determination of both sides as no country can rely on the old formula to ensure national interests, the rising of China’s decisiveness and America’s uncertain political trajectory.

4.1.2. Economics
In recent years, the India–Australia relationship has made many achievements in the field of economy and trade. The total trade turnover of the two countries reached approximately US$ 30.4 billion in 2018, more than double the 2007 level of US$ 13.6 billion (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia, 2020). After the meeting on June 4 between Modi and Morrison, the two sides discussed the issue of income tax of Indian companies abroad using the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA). At the same time, they exchanged the possibility of signing the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) proposed in 2011. In addition, both sides signed an agreement on cooperation in education and research, creating opportunities for Indian students to study in Australia to revive the economy affected by the decline in the number of Chinese overseas students. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the two sides explored and cooperated in mining and processing rare earth metals, such as lithium, neodymium, and dysprosium, of which Australia has the third largest reserves in the world. Meanwhile, India also set the goal of reducing dependence on importing these materials from China (90% of rare earth metals) and diversification of import sources (Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 2020).

4.1.3. Security and defense
Australian Defense Minister L. Reynolds stated that India is Australia’s important security partner, and the two countries were very interested in working together to support a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region (Nhàn Dan Newspaper, 2020). The turning point of the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” between India and Australia would not only promote bilateral diplomatic
cooperation but also open opportunities to foster security and defense cooperation. Two important agreements signed on June 4th—Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) and the Defense Science and Technology Implementing Agreement (DSTIA)—created a framework for strengthening defense cooperation between the two countries. According to the MLSA, India and Australia have the right to use each other’s military facilities to provide logistical support in case of conflict. In addition, under the new framework of cooperation, the Australian and Indian Foreign and Defense Ministers will conduct a biennial 2 + 2 dialogue to discuss strategic issues to ensure stability and development in the Indo-Pacific region.

The bilateral security and defense cooperation is demonstrated through periodic bilateral and multilateral exercises. The bilateral naval exercise, AUSINDEX, was initiated in 2015 and held every 2 years. The two sides had the largest naval exercise AUSINDEX in 2019. The complexity of AUSINDEX has increased, and the navies of both sides are comfortable with the results achieved. Both countries have experienced joint activities in the Malabar exercise with the US, Japan and Singapore in 2007.

### 4.2. Multilateral co-operations

India and Australia have participated and contributed to the development of institutions. Both are founding members of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, G7 and G20. They both have opportunities to forge multilateral cooperation through many different regimes and participated in many forums or conferences in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Southeast Asian Regional Forum (ARF), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and QUAD+. These activities are valuable in strengthening relations with ASEAN countries to counterbalance China and maintain maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region.

#### 4.2.1. The IORA and the IONS

The IORA is the only ministerial forum related to this region used to ensure maritime safety and security and enhance economic cooperation and investment. Australia is a founding member, which has sought to secure its interests and strengthen bilateral relations with many countries in the region, including India. During the Association’s presidency (2018–2019), India hosted the Indian Ocean Dialogue under the theme “Indo-Pacific: Re-imagining the Indian Ocean through an Expended Geography” when the Delhi Dialogue with the theme “Advancing Partnership in Indo-Pacific” was held concurrently. This was the first time two important dialogues of the IORA and India-ASEAN cooperation were hosted at the same time. Thereby, India’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to emphasize the concept of an open, free and rules-based Indo-Pacific region.

The IONS is an open and comprehensive forum, helping littoral states’ navies in the Indian Ocean to enhance maritime cooperation and build an effective maritime security structure. This conference provided opportunities for India, as the sponsor of the birth of IONS in 2008, to build institutions, set agendas, and increase influence in the region. As for Australia, Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Ray Griggs commented on the importance of IONS that security in the Indian Ocean is a common responsibility for countries sharing a maritime border within this strategic area. Cooperation would help achieve the set goals (Department of Defense of Australia, 2014). During the 2 years of holding the position of IONS President (2014–2015), Australia completed the Charter of the Conference even though it was only established 6 years before.

Via cooperation in IORA and IONS, India and Australia have demonstrated a deep concern and great contribution to the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region as a whole and the ability to cooperate and coordinate effectively with multilateral institutions.

#### 4.2.2. The EAS and the ARF

Since 2005, the EAS has been the only leading forum, where key partners meet to discuss the full spectrum of political, economic and security challenges facing the Indo-Pacific and foster regional
cooperation. The EAS is of great significance for India, as a founding member of the organization, in the implementation of the Act-East Policy as it could build multi-sectoral relationships with countries inside and outside the ASEAN community multilaterally and bilaterally. As for Australia, also a founding member of the organization, the EAS helps Canberra gain access to two major partners, China, and the US. However, Australia has maintained and enhanced its cooperative relationship with ASEAN countries, pushing its Asia-oriented policy and expanding the market to neighboring countries. The EAS members welcomed the adoption of the Manila Action Plan to promote the Phnom Penh Declaration, making maritime cooperation a new area of cooperation under the EAS Development Initiative (2018–2022).

India joined the ARF in 1996 and has been recognized as an active contributor as the development of the forum by co-hosting the Ministerial ARF Meeting 2015, the SOM ARF 2016 in Laos as well as participating in many meetings at all levels within the ARF framework. India’s actions are closely linked to the Act-East policy, which aims to increase its presence in various fields and is committed to the goal of ensuring peace and stability in the region. Similarly, Australia co-hosted the ARF workshop on “Strengthening Regional Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation” in 2018 and 2019 and the ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security (ARF-ISM) in 2019.

The presence of India and Australia at the EAS and ARF shows that the common interest of both countries is directed towards Southeast Asia in various aspects, including diplomatic, economic, and international affairs. Both sides should utilize this advantage to strengthen the progress of the comprehensive strategic partnership.

4.2.3. The QUAD
The QUAD includes the US, Japan, Australia, and India. In the context of China’s rise, the QUAD acts as a counterweight to China’s ambition by serving as the intersection and development of India’s Act-East Policy and Australia’s Asia-oriented Policy. The group upgraded the dialogue to the ministerial level and enhanced the exchange and cooperation of its members towards the goal of developing a common position on regional security issues. The bloc is shaped by foreign ministries, so the agenda is not solely about security. However, important security developments are taking place at the bilateral and multilateral levels (Ngo Minh Tri, 2020). The security quadrant of the QUAD should be considered not only as a dialogue channel for India and Australia to utilize resources and relationships to meet their national interests effectively but also as a chance for maintaining cooperation within the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership framework.

Besides, the relationship between Australia and India is also strongly promoted through the Japan—India—Australia tripartite mechanism, India—France—Australia trilateral mechanism, and the quadrilateral mechanism (the Quartet) including the US India, Japan, and Australia. If the Quartet mechanism is considered by the Chinese side to contain China, the trilateral dialogue mechanism of Japan, India, and Australia also discusses security issues and makes commitments to respond to challenges, including those brought by China. Formed in 2015, the fourth Japan, India, and Australia Tripartite Dialogue (2017), on the one hand, has affirmed the commitment of the parties to peace, democracy, economic growth, and a rules-based regional order and, on the other hand, emphasized the need for stronger coordination on maritime security (“Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India,” 2017). In the face of growing security challenges in the Indian Ocean, including the growing presence of China’s navy in the ocean, India, France and Australia held online trilateral dialogues September 2020 to discuss geostrategic challenges, respective strategies for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific to ensure peace, security and compliance with international law in the Indo-Pacific (French Embassy in New Delhi, 2020).
5. Conclusion

Facing the rise of China and the US–China escalation of conflict, India and Australia have many similarities in ensuring national interests and balancing relations with the US and China, contributing to promoting the relationship between the two countries. The bilateral relationship has made certain progress through policies and actual implementing actions. The upgrade of the relationship to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” has paved the way for deeper and broader cooperation in various fields, from high-level to grass-root politics. Periodic high-level dialogues and frameworks have been established, opening the possibility of working towards future agreements. The progress creates an impetus for the two countries to cooperate more closely in many fields, especially the military, opening the prospect that both sides would play an active role in ensuring regional security and maritime interests. Bilateral and multilateral activities have aimed at preventing the formation of a Sino-centric order. Bilateral achievements involve logistical support, exercises, military capabilities, and the ability to support each other. Bilateral commitments are put into practice with tangible actions.

Regarding the multilateral relationship, India and Australia have endeavored to participate, guide and contribute to the multilateral organizations, forums and conferences of which both are members. The two sides embraced leadership and orientating roles in forums, like IORA, IONS, creating an environment for experts, scholars, and policy makers to participate and contribute their views on the consolidation of a free, peaceful and sustainable Indo-Pacific. In the future, this relationship has opportunities to develop with effective actions, provided that the mutual interests of both remain unchanged and are not divided by individual interests.

There remain shortcomings when it comes to the effectiveness of bilateral activities. The first limitation is that despite upholding the spirit of respect for the rule of law at sea, it is rare to see India and Australia speak out against China’s unilateral actions in the Indo-Pacific. Although the rise of China has been ongoing, it would take time for India and Australia to react and move forward because of their dependence on and different perspectives about their complex relations with China. Another limitation is that while actively participating in multilateral forums, these institutions serve to facilitate a dialogue framework for regional countries. These organizations could not intervene and coordinate regional issues. Cooperative activities also take place only in low-level political fields, not showing the role of protecting regional peace and security. Another difficulty believed to hold back these institutions’ development is India’s policy-making tradition, which tends to prioritize economic interests over multilateral security. Consequently, these organizations do not exert expected influence on raised issues.

Efforts to contain China have yet to achieve concrete results. The proof is that China continues to implement its illegal claims and conduct unilateral actions, raising doubts as to whether these efforts are helpful in counterbalancing China. Since the China’s rise, middle powers must deal with concerns on power, given their lack of ability to influence China-related issues. In fact, China has not yet viewed the India–Australia relationship as a major threat. In the future, India and Australia may have to think about taking tougher measures, after agreeing on a common approach toward China.

These shortcomings are partly due to differences in the two countries’ views of the China factor and each country’s strategic vision. Australia only considers China’s expansion as an issue of influence. Hence, Australia’s countermeasures and policies revolve around issues that can affect the country directly or indirectly. Meanwhile, India has territorial conflicts with China and considers China as a vital actor in its long-term strategy. On the other hand, Australia considers the US an important ally and wishes to maintain this link, while India has committed not to align with any countries and would implement multi-alignment in mandatory situations. This may lead to different trends in long-term goals and the process of India–Australia cooperation.
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Note
1. Some Indian islands are only about 145 km from the
Strait of Malacca

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