

ANCHORING TIES WITH CANBERRA THE VIRTUAL WAY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Australia

In August 1950, one of Australia's most celebrated jurists, Sir Owen Dixon (who sought to mediate a settlement on Kashmir) wrote to his daughter, Anne, in Melbourne that Delhi was "a place I hope and trust that I shall never again see." Nearly 70 years later, as the Prime Ministers of India and Australia, Narendra Modi and Scott Morrison, prepare for next week's virtual summit (June 4), it is not because of any such reservation about India's capital. Today, New Delhi ranks extremely high on Australia's diplomatic radar; the new High Commissioner Barry O'Farrell's appointment is reflective of how far we have moved from Sir Owen's time. A former Premier of New South Wales and a celebrated public figure, Mr. O'Farrell has already made his presence felt in India through the increasingly ubiquitous world of webinars in his colourful Indian waistcoats.

Almost all of Australia's recent Prime Ministers, including Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull have visited India. Mr. Morrison's visit to India, in January, was postponed because of the devastating bushfires in Australia, and now because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When Mr. Modi travelled to Australia in 2014, 28 years after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit, in 1986, he electrified the country with his presence, including business leaders from the country in a panel discussion.

It is tempting to view the virtual summit only in the context of the turbulent geopolitics of the region. In reality, New Delhi's relations with Canberra have acquired such spread and depth today that even without the undeniable belligerence of an increasingly inscrutable China, the summit would still have had salience and similar gravitas.

The idea of the Australia-India relationship has well and truly arrived; and while Australia's population is roughly the same as the National Capital Region, the potential for a shared partnership extends well beyond Mr. Modi and Mr. Morrison trying to deconstruct the inscrutable mind of China's supreme leader, Xi Jinping, or the manner in which the World Health Organization has acted amid the spread of the pandemic.

Virtual summits are no longer a novelty. Mr. Modi convened a multilateral summit to bring South Asia together to face the pandemic, and he spoke online with G-20 leaders on similar issues. But India's first bilateral summit is with Australia; and it is no longer surprising. The convergence of interests and values has been patently obvious; but the time has also come to translate that potential into reality.

The two countries have sought to reconstruct their increasingly turbulent regional geography into the Indo-Pacific and while grudgingly in the past, and often in fits and starts, seen the Quad (with Japan and the United States) as the most potent instrument to promote cooperation; not surprisingly, causing apprehensions in Beijing.

It is expected that the 'Mutual Logistics Support Agreement' will be signed during the summit that should enhance defence cooperation and ease the conduct of large-scale joint military exercises. Last April, Australia and India conducted AUSINDEX, their largest bilateral naval exercise, and there are further developments on the anvil, including Australia's permanent inclusion in the Malabar exercise with Japan. In addition, it may be prudent too for New Delhi and Canberra to elevate the 'two plus two' format for talks from the Secretary level to the level of

Foreign and Defence Ministers.

But beyond the realpolitik of strategy, is the managing of cooperation in areas that matter to the lives of the people of the two nations: health, food and education.

Mr. Morrison has emerged as a statesman (during the COVID-19 pandemic) by bringing in the national opposition and reaching out to state leaders in the most effective and efficient display of cooperative federalism. So much so that the Australian writer Richard Flanagan suggested, in *The New York Times* (May 18,2020), that polarising ideologies in Australia were killed by the coronavirus given the united national response.

Australia is one of the few countries that has managed to combat COVID-19 so far through “controlled adaptation” by which the coronavirus has been suppressed to very low levels. Two of the leaders of this great Australia-wide effort are Indian-born scientists. Shitij Kapur, of the University of Melbourne, led a community of academics to produce a pathbreaking report, “Roadmap to recovery”, while S.S. Vasan is leading efforts to develop a vaccine in a Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) facility in a dangerous pathogens facility in Geelong, near Melbourne. There is much that the two Prime Ministers can share on this front.

In terms of health and safe food as well the supply chains that facilitate their delivery, there are important lessons to be learnt. One of Australia’s richest businessman, Anthony Pratt of Pratt Industries, and first patron of the Australia-India Leadership Dialogue, recently described the promise of DTC-CPG (direct to consumer; consumer packaged goods) which could transform global supply chains. Here too there is much room for collaboration and new thinking.

The recovery of Australia’s universities, most of which are publicly funded and many rank among the top in the world, is still in question, but they are proving to be resilient and pioneers in distance and online learning. Australian universities could well open earlier than most and emerge as a safer destination for quality education than their European or Ivy league counterparts.

Till a few weeks ago, the prospect of teaching online a course on Contemporary India to Australian Students from the University of Melbourne seemed daunting to this writer. But with slides of Ambedkar, Gandhi and even snippets from the movies of Satyajit Ray, the enormous potential of online learning became obvious; the students were excited intellectually by both the robustness of Indian democracy, and the diversity of its experience as a federation. Although the course was on India, the enormous potential of young Australians and Indians working and building fresh order in a turbulent world became starkly obvious. The virtual summit, in this sense, could not have been better timed.

Amitabh Mattoo is Chair of the Australia-India Leadership Dialogue and was the founding Director of The Australia India Institute

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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