

This article is related to General Studies-Paper-II (International Relations) & III (Environment & Ecology)

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"The raging bushfires give India and Australia a chance to deepen their dialogue, including on energy."

The writer David Horne once described Australia as "the lucky country", with its abundance of natural resources, good weather, and its relative geographical isolation from the turbulence of the world. Today, with wildfires burning more than 12 million hectares of land, destroying native flora, killing thousands of wild animals, including endangered species, and displacing residents and tourists, Australia is confronted with a dystopian vision, where "apocalypse becomes the new normal", to borrow the title of a recent op-ed by Nobel laureate, Paul Krugman.

Dialogue on energy

At this moment of crisis, and while the tragedy of the bushfires is still unfolding, New Delhi and Canberra have a rare opportunity: to translate their rapidly converging interests and coalescing of values into a formidable partnership for the 21st century. When I co-chaired the Australia India Leadership Dialogue last month in Melbourne, the breadth and depth of the relationship was evident, as was the scope for the future in diverse areas, including the grand challenges facing our planet.

Clearly, as a consequence of the bushfires, the debate on global warming, climate change and fossil fuels is going to intensify in the weeks ahead, even while scientists grapple with the new evidence. Australia's celebrated novelist Richard Flanagan concluded in a powerful, if controversial, essay: "Australia today is ground zero for the climate catastrophe." As evidence, he pointed out that the Great Barrier Reef "is dying", the "world-heritage rain forests are burning", giant kelp forests have disappeared, "numerous towns have run out of water or are about to, and now the vast continent is burning on a scale never before seen."

Mr. Flanagan is not alone; environmental activism has gained ground throughout the country, and while the Indian Ocean Dipole may have triggered the drought that is related to the fires, the campaign against fossil fuels and the export of coal is sure to intensify in the days to come.

As two economies with a great stakeholding in fossil fuels, it is critical for India and Australia to ensure that their dialogue on energy acquires momentum. This will require a joint scientific task force to disinter the latest evidence linking climate change and extreme climatic events with fossil fuels and to study the promise and potential of "clean" coal technology. Both countries must simultaneously strengthen the International Solar Alliance and the search for other alternative green fuels.

The Leadership Dialogue also recognised that we are living through a period of immense turbulence, disruption and even subversion. For instance, the near overwhelming presence of an illiberal, totalitarian China, increasingly unilateralist, interventionist and mercantilist and willing to write its own rules, is the single biggest challenge to our two

countries. Not even our thought leaders of the future or political representatives today, especially in Australian universities and democratic institutions, are sanitised from Beijing's surveillance or longer-term grand designs.

Fortunately, in New Delhi there is a near consensus within the political leadership and the strategic community that the Australia-India relationship is an idea whose time has well and truly come. From water management to trauma research to skills and higher education, from maritime and cybersecurity to counterterrorism, a world of opportunities awaits the two countries if they can work in coordination.

A few years ago, the Australia-India Institute at the University of Melbourne, in partnership with the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, commissioned one of the most comprehensive surveys of Indian public opinion on key foreign policy issues and critical challenges of governance. Indians ranked Australia in the top four nations towards which they feel most warmly. Only the U.S., Singapore and Japan ranked higher. Today, Indians feel warmer towards Australia than towards European countries and BRICS nations.

Apart from being two English-speaking, multicultural, federal democracies that believe in and respect the rule of law, both have a strategic interest in ensuring a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region in which the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity are ensured. In addition, Indians are today the largest source of skilled migrants in Australia and the economic relationship, already robust, could potentially be transformed if the promise of the Peter Varghese and Anil Wadhwa reports, commissioned by the two governments, is realised. In Canberra, there is considerable sensitivity to India's concerns over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership while there is still hope that there is an early conclusion of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement.

An important partner

After more than six decades characterised by misperception, lack of trust, neglect, missed opportunities and even hostility, a new chapter in India's relations with Australia has well and truly begun. Consider this: in 1955, Prime Minister Robert Menzies decided that Australia should not take part in the Bandung Afro-Asian conference. By distancing Australia from the 'new world', Menzies (who would later confess that Occidentals did not understand India) alienated Indians, offended Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and left Australia unsure for decades about its Asian identity. India and Australia should bring this chequered past to a closure, and herald a new united front for the Indo-Pacific.

Nearly a decade ago, when I decided to be the inaugural director of the Australia India Institute at Melbourne, it was seen as a giant leap of faith. I had not visited Australia before and had little knowledge of the country. My friends warned me that I was literally going "Down Under", soon to become irrelevant and marginal to all policy issues in India. At school, my teenage daughters were told they risked being bashed up in school and college, and my extended family was astounded. But today I have no doubt that it was one of the best decisions of my life. With not one unpleasant experience in the country, as a family we have found Australians open, friendly, fair, accepting and generous, and the country a model of good governance.

In her account of India-Australia bilateral relations, historian Meg Gurry relates how Arthur Tange, High Commissioner to India and one of Australia's most formidable diplomats, wrote in 1965 to his Foreign Minister, Paul Hasluck, that there was fertile ground between the two countries, but "no one seems to know what seed to plant". More than 50 years on, there are not only many seeds waiting to be planted, but also ripe fruit ready to harvest.

While Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who postponed his visit to India because of the bushfires, will be missed at the Raisina Dialogue, one hopes that one immediate decision that be will taken by New Delhi and Canberra is to elevate the 'two plus two' format for talks from the secretary level to the level of foreign and defence ministers. That should signal that New Delhi recognises Canberra as important a partner as Washington and Tokyo.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements in the context of Indian Ocean Dipole:

1. It is known as Indian Nino.
2. Due to this the western Indian Ocean becomes warmer alternately and cooler than the east.
3. It is an irregular oscillation of sea surface temperature.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) All of the above

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 7 Jan., is 1 (a)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q.** India-Australia may be countries in two different hemispheres, but the challenges posed by natural disasters are common to both in many perspectives. In such a situation, it is important that the two countries move forward through a common strategy. "Analyze this statement. (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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