

India and Australia: Strategic partners bound by growing soft power linkages

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Higher education has emerged as an important linkage between both countries. As Australia seeks to reduce dependence on Chinese students, it would want to attract more Indian students.



By [Tridivesh Singh Maini](#) Mar 22, 2023

Image

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at Narendra Modi stadium in Ahmedabad (Photo: Twitter)

In a changing geopolitical landscape, strategic ties between India and Australia have strengthened significantly. Both countries are important stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific strategy and members of the Quad. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in a tweet ahead of his India visit (March 8-11, 2023) said: "We have a historic opportunity to strengthen our relationship with India, at a time of extraordinary growth and dynamism in our region."

One of the propelling factors for closer strategic and economic cooperation between Australia and India is strained Canberra-Beijing and New Delhi-Beijing ties. India will be participating not just in the Malabar exercises to be held in Australia later this year, but will also take part for the first time in Australia's Talisman Sabre exercise.

In the economic sphere, Australia is keen to reduce its dependence upon China, after bilateral ties between Beijing and Canberra witnessed a downward spiral in recent years. India and Australia signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), referred to as Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) which came into effect in January 2023.

Strategic and economic ties between New Delhi and Canberra are bound to grow as was evident from the India visit of the Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, earlier this month. During Albanese's India visit, at the India-Australia summit held on Friday, March 10, 2023, Modi and Albanese discussed several important bilateral and global issues.

While commenting on India's importance in the context of the Indo-Pacific and the relevance of his India visit, the Albanese had said: "My visit reflects my government's commitment to place India at the heart of Australia's approach to the Indo-Pacific and beyond,"

Albanese, whose delegation included several top Australian CEOs, also emphasized the need to give a push to bilateral economic relations between both countries.

Australian university opens overseas campus

It would be pertinent to point out, that soft power has emerged as an important dimension of the India-Australia relationship. This includes the game of cricket, the Indian diaspora in Australia and higher education. It has often been said that the India-Australia relationship is driven by three Cs – cricket, curry and Commonwealth. While it is true that the bilateral relationship has moved beyond soft power linkages, there is no doubt that it is still an important component.

During his visit, Albanese along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi watched the first test between Australia and India for half an hour. Both leaders also took a lap of honour around the Ahmedabad stadium.

One of the highlights of Albanese's visit was the inauguration of the Deakin University campus at GIFT (Gujarat International Finance Tec) city in Gujarat. This is the first overseas campus of Deakin University, which is home to over 5,000 students from India. To begin with, the Deakin University branch, referred to as Deakin International Branch Campus, will be focusing on postgraduate programs (the first two programs are a professional qualification in cybersecurity and a professional qualification in business analytics).

It would be pertinent to point out, that international higher education can no longer be de-hyphenated from geopolitics. With the deterioration of relations between Australia and China, the former is likely to attract more Indian students. Currently, while the Chinese are the largest group in the international student community, Indians are the second largest group. As of 2022, 96,000 students were enrolled in Australian Universities. In 2019, Chinese students accounted for one-third of the total international higher education income, while Indian students brought in half of this amount.

Apart from the inauguration of the Deakin campus, Albanese also announced the Maitri scholarship for Indian students to study for up to four years in Australia and both countries had also recently signed the Australia-India Education Qualification Recognition Mechanism. In a tweet, Albanese said:

Strong soft-power component

“Our educational ties with India are about to get even closer. We’ve finalised a deal that means students who study in Australia and India can have more of their qualifications recognised between our two countries”.

The agreement referred to as Framework Mechanism for Mutual Recognition of Qualifications between both countries had been signed earlier this month following a bilateral meeting between Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan and Australian counterpart Jason Clare. 11 memorandums were also signed between Australian and Indian institutions during the visit of Jason Clare.

While speaking at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, on March 11, Albanese reiterated the importance of growing linkages between both countries in the sphere of higher education saying that this would be important in the context of both countries’

future.

The Australia-India relationship is a multi-faceted one driven by the changing geopolitical dynamics, but it also has a strong soft-power component. Higher education has emerged as an important linkage between both countries; as Australia seeks to reduce dependence on Chinese students, it would want to attract more Indian students. For Indian students, Australia is likely to remain a preferred study abroad destination due to the high-quality education provided there as well as better career opportunities.

(The writer is a New Delhi-based policy analyst associated with The OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India. Views are personal. He can be reached at tsmaini@jgu.edu.in)