

# Gendering the Indo-Pacific Dialogue: Opportunities for India and Australia

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## Introduction

Viewing the confluence of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean as a distinctive and interdependent strategic and economic space is fundamentally changing the way both India and Australia think about and examine their relationship with the broader region.<sup>i</sup> The Indo-Pacific as a strategic construct has grown in prominence in global geopolitical discourse, especially over the last five years. The EU, USA, and several countries in Europe have in place or are developing their own strategies for engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. The European Union collectively advocates for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', designed to foster a 'rules-based international order, a level playing field, as well as an open and fair environment for trade and investment, tackling climate change and supporting connectivity.'<sup>ii</sup> For France, the Indo-Pacific is at the heart of its vision for a stable multipolar order, and the Indo-Pacific is listed as a 'priority and essential partner'.<sup>iii</sup> Germany too is making an active contribution to shaping the international order in the Indo-Pacific, so that it is 'based on rules and international cooperation, not on the law of the strong.'<sup>iv</sup>

The significance of the construct is varied for countries that are part of the region. The scope of the conversation in the Indo-Pacific is widening, with more diverse and varied perspectives being brought to the forefront. In this paper, against the backdrop of global Feminist Foreign Policy conversations, we focus on how Australia and India view the Indo-Pacific; marking the shifts in both countries' approaches, along with bringing in important aspects of their bilateral relationship, highlighting how the Indo-Pacific has grown in significance to become a foreign policy priority, how both India and Australia have incorporated a gender lens in their actions, and what could be the avenues for Australia and India to apply such a lens in their collaborations.

## Overview of the Indo-Australian Engagement

At its core, current avenues of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific strongly rely on enhancing economic ties and maintaining strategic interests: most multilateral and regional forums and dialogues like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific (AUKUS), and Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), amongst others, have a strong defence and security element. India and Australia both look to the Indo-Pacific region as a construct that serves to safeguard their security, economic interests and balance of power in the region. Australia for example, through the 'Indo-Pacific Endeavour' (IPE), an annual Australian Defence Force (ADF) activity that started in 2017, seeks to strengthen Australia's engagement and partnerships with regional security forces. India also seeks to expand its footprint in evolving Indo-Pacific engagements, leveraging collaborative partnerships to cement its place in the region's security environment, through an array of maritime initiatives and regional forums such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). At the recent February 2022 Quad Foreign Ministers meeting in Melbourne, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar commented, "As leading democracies, we pursue our shared vision of upholding a rules-based international order free from coercion based on respect for territorial integrity sovereignty, rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation in the international seas and peaceful resolution."<sup>v</sup>

This is where we see the opportunity to anchor the gender mainstreaming dialogue and deepen the relationship between both countries. The gender lens widely being considered in Feminist Foreign Policy and

similar gender mainstreaming approaches could serve to integrate Indian and Australian approaches in a way that helps prepare and deal with the uncertain nature of evolving challenges to human security in the region; policies and approaches that are ultimately inclusive and equitable. There has been an uptick in strategic conversations and efforts between India and Australia, most notably the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' of 2020, which mentions 'Strategy and Planning, enhancing Science and Technology collaboration, Maritime Cooperation for an Inclusive and Open Indo-Pacific, Defence Cooperation, Multilateral and Regional Cooperation, Counter Terrorism, and Economic Cooperation', amongst other things.<sup>vi</sup> While security and defence remain a priority for both Indian and Australian foreign policy, the scope of what constitutes to be a part of security is steadily growing with increasing risks from emerging threats such as climate change, natural disasters, health and economic security.

This renewed alliance between Australia and India has resulted in both countries recognising the other as a key partner for trade, defence, security, and maritime cooperation, culminating in the inaugural India-Australia 2+2 dialogue in September 2021, which mentions "promoting practical cooperation in COVID-19 vaccines, maritime security, climate change, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, connectivity and infrastructure, counter-terrorism, and critical and emerging technologies." Markedly, both countries acknowledged and expressed concern about the situation of women's rights in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, noting the "rapid roll-back on women and girls' rights and access to services and public spaces, as well as targeted violence against women's rights defenders, and reiterated their call for protection of rights of women and children and their full participation in public life, agreeing that a broad-based and inclusive government is necessary for long term peace and stability in Afghanistan."<sup>vii</sup> This is particularly distinctive as it is rare for conversations on women's and human rights to feature in defence and security dialogues, blurring connotations of 'hard' and 'soft' security, and opening up a space to include non-traditional security challenges. In the recently held March 2022 India-Australia virtual summit, the commitment to the India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was reaffirmed by the Prime Ministers of both countries, underscoring that deepening bilateral ties were built on foundations of trust, cooperation, and shared values.<sup>viii</sup> The leaders emphasised economic and trade cooperation, climate and energy and science and technology collaboration, and security and defence cooperation. This language demonstrates a broadening of strategic focus.

## Approaches to Gender Mainstreaming in Australian and Indian Foreign Policy

A significant part of Australia's sustained outreach in the Indo-Pacific is driven by the need to protect and

uphold maritime security and freedom of navigation. However, as Katrina Lee-Koo has noted, gender in Australia's foreign policy appears almost "by stealth" and that "Australia has an emerging commitment to pro-gender norms in its foreign policy, which has a more robust design, with a stronger focus on implementation, monitoring, and evaluation."<sup>ix</sup> A key takeaway from the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper published by the Australian Government, is that gender equality is employed as a strategy to achieve broader foreign policy objectives, and that gender need not be sidelined at the cost of strategic and realist ambitions, but can be mainstreamed in order to achieve them.<sup>x</sup> Australia has also taken efforts to ensure more robust participation of women in its military, by trying to retain women officers, recruit more women, and understand barriers to their promotion and retention.<sup>xi</sup> India too has taken some steps in the recent past to address women's participation in the armed forces. Advocacy around FFP in the western context often critiques the coexistence of military and defence spending with a country having an FFP<sup>xii</sup> but the reality of the Indo-Pacific, with Chinese aggression and a deviation from international law, requires major powers and their allies to prioritise strengthening their security partnership. Gender equality in the military, therefore, is a pragmatic approach towards gender mainstreaming in the Indo-Pacific in entirety.

India has championed an inclusive approach to foreign policy, though sometimes seemingly in a disconnected manner, through its development cooperation initiatives as well as engagement on climate change and health security. For example, it established the International Solar Alliance (ISA) along with France in 2015, where the business models developed by ISA took gender equity into consideration. India has been a major exporter of medicines to countries in the neighbourhood as well as in Africa. During the COVID-19 pandemic, against several odds, India took up the lead to supply medicines and vaccinations in the neighbourhood. India has also taken initiative in incorporating gender mainstreaming approaches to aid, development, and assistance, through project planning, giving grants and loans, and in capacity building and knowledge sharing initiatives. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), launched in 1964 as a bilateral assistance program, expanded its scope from training to providing scholarships to students, government, and private personnel to boost capacity building, to benefit India's neighbours and some African countries. India also sent an All-Women Peace Keeping Force to Liberia in 2007, the first country to do so, marking a shift in engagement in that front.<sup>xiii</sup> Hailed positively by the global community, this move also encouraged Liberian women to join the national police, tripling the number of female applicants, from approximately 120 to 350 within two months of the arrival of the Indian unit and a growing female representation from 10% to 17% in the Liberian Security Services

While it is encouraging to see gendered considerations in India's external engagements, there is however, some reticence to using the term 'Feminist Foreign Policy'. This is mainly due to the perception of the word 'feminist' being associated with western feminist ideals or with a radical form of activism. This can be circumvented by focussing on the application of feminist principles to foreign policy design to create more inclusive policy outcomes that have greater impact.

## Avenues for Further Collaboration

Given the emerging shared priorities between India and Australia, we recommend a few avenues where the two countries could work together to bring in an inclusionary/gender lens and also deepen bilateral relations through such an approach.

### Rights-Based Approach

Language and other diplomatic instruments play an important role to frame a values-driven and rights-based approach that is typically viewed as a contrast to realist and strategic ambitions. There is some scope to employ the language of inclusion to more tactical issues especially in congruence with existing defence dialogues and tools of cooperation. Countries in the Indo-Pacific are inclined towards a non-hegemonic regionalism. India and Australia can deepen their bilateral relationship in multilateral and regional forums such as ASEAN, APEC, and IORA to work more strongly towards having inclusionary measures that will also strengthen a rules-based world order.

### Widening the scope of defence and security

Security is a key component of the India-Australia relationship in the Indo-Pacific, and inclusivity in defence is thus imperative. For example, a UN WOMEN-UNDRR report that examines progress on Sendai Framework targets to see how gender-responsive and disability-inclusive they are, finds the need for greater understanding on vulnerabilities (amongst other issues), to build capacities to mainstream gender-equal and socially inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).<sup>xiv</sup>

As more areas in the Indo-Pacific become prone to natural disasters, its population becomes more vulnerable, and women and marginalised groups are more likely to suffer from the underlying risks of inequality – studies show that women are 14 times more likely to die from disasters than men, and these discrepancies are directly related to women's social and economic rights.<sup>xv</sup>

Since both the Indian and Australian navy emphasise and work on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), they could work together to include a more inclusive lens, with sensitisation and training,

that may improve outcomes, by taking women's voices into consideration and involving them in the decision-making process.

### Trade and Economic Cooperation

A large part of the Indo-Pacific conversation relies on economic cooperation, but an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific needs to consider the involvement of women in the economy. Despite making some progress towards reducing gender gaps, inequalities still persist in labour force participation, financial inclusion and representation across managerial positions.<sup>xvi</sup> Resolving these disparities would lead to monumental growth in the region – in 2017 the International Labour Organisation estimated that closing gender gaps could add USD 3.2 trillion to the entire Asia-Pacific economy.<sup>xvii</sup> Presently, empowering women to achieve economic security is more visible in both countries' internal policies, and domestic gender realities are vastly different in India and Australia. While the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has committed to advancing gender equality, and is well-placed to advocate for economic security through funding and development programmes, specifically addressing economic security will require a more targeted and collaborative approach encompassing different key allies in the Indo-Pacific.

An opportunity for deeper engagement with gender considerations here could be for example through the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) launched in 2021 by the trade ministers of India, Japan and Australia. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of sustainable and resilient supply chains, reiterated by the SCRI, which states that it "aims to create a virtuous cycle of enhancing supply chain resilience with a view to eventually attaining strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth in the region."<sup>xviii</sup> Women are often excluded from supply chains, face difficulties in accessing economic opportunities, and are vulnerable to human rights violations. Gender specific initiatives within the SCRI can target these issues while also fulfilling foreign policy ambitions and this bringing about an inclusive lens to overall economic growth that ultimately benefits all.

### Sharing information and data

During the India-Australia 2+2 dialogue, Ministers welcomed the presence of a Liaison Officer from Australia at the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) near New Delhi.<sup>xix</sup> The IFC-IOR was set up in 2018 as an information-sharing hub for maritime data, and underscores the Indian government's approach and effort in line with the vision of Security and Growth of All in the Region (SAGAR). "IFC-IOR aims to engage with partner nations and multi-national maritime constructs to develop comprehensive maritime domain awareness and share information on vessels of interest. The intention of this collaborative endeavour shall be to

secure the global commons for a peaceful, stable and prosperous region towards the well-being of all.”<sup>xx</sup>

Enhancing science and tech and research collaboration has been a point of discussion at many India-Australia dialogues. <sup>xxi</sup> As ties between India and Australia develop, whether bilaterally, or tri/multilaterally (such as through the India-France-Australia trilateral, or the SCRI), closer engagement within policy circles can be fostered, by including the think-tank or business communities to support ongoing diplomacy dialogues with the aim of ensuring that a diverse set of perspectives, experiences, unique challenges, ideas and strategic thinking is brought to the overall policy making system.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific represents the largest self-identified strategic space in the world, and countering future challenges in the region will require more varied perspectives and greater diversity in thought. Best exemplified by COVID-19, a collaborative and synergistic approach is necessary to counter these emerging challenges while also maintaining mutual interests. Both traditional and non-traditional security threats have a gender component, and a disproportionate impact on women and the marginalised, as witnessed during the pandemic. Gender has only recently been included as a component of foreign policy discourse, and must be the foundation on which an inclusive Indo-Pacific is built. India and Australia, both in geographically significant positions, must act upon their renewed and reinvigorated security ties to help reimagine what the Indo-Pacific could look like in the future to come.

## THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women’s rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> [https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/australias-view-of-the-indo-pacific-concept/#\\_ednref7](https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/australias-view-of-the-indo-pacific-concept/#_ednref7)

<sup>ii</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.auswaertiges-](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/german-government-policy-guidelines-indo-pacific/2380510)

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<sup>v</sup> [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34855/Opening+Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+at+the+4th+Quad+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+in+Melbourne)

[Statements.htm?dtl/34855/Opening+Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+at+the+4th+Quad+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+in+Melbourne](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34855/Opening+Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+at+the+4th+Quad+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+in+Melbourne)

<sup>vi</sup> [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32729/Joint_Statement_on_a_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership_between_Republic_of_India_and_Australia)

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<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35008/JOINT+STATEMENT++INDIAAUSTRALIA+VIRTUAL+SUMMIT)

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<sup>viii</sup> [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35008/JOINT+STATEMENT++INDIAAUSTRALIA+VIRTUAL+SUMMIT)

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<sup>ix</sup> [https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article-](https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article-abstract/16/2/236/5782386?redirectedFrom=fulltext)

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<sup>x</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>

<sup>xi</sup> [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/Publications\\_Archive/archive/womenarmed](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/womenarmed)

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23745118.2019.1661940>

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/gallery/541602>

<sup>xiv</sup> [https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/review-gender-responsiveness-](https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/review-gender-responsiveness-and-disability-inclusion-disaster-risk-reduction-asia-and)

[and-disability-inclusion-disaster-risk-reduction-asia-and](https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/review-gender-responsiveness-and-disability-inclusion-disaster-risk-reduction-asia-and)

<sup>xv</sup> [https://www.unisdr.org/files/48152\\_disasterandgenderstatistics.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/48152_disasterandgenderstatistics.pdf)

<sup>xvi</sup> [https://www.adb.org/news/op-ed/reducing-gender-gaps-asia-and-pacific-](https://www.adb.org/news/op-ed/reducing-gender-gaps-asia-and-pacific-essential-realizing-region-s-potential-ingrid-van)

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<sup>xvii</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_557776/lang--](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_557776/lang--en/index.htm)

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<sup>xviii</sup> [https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1714362#:~:text=The](https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1714362#:~:text=The%20SCRI%20aims%20to%20create,if%20needed%2C%20in%20due%20course.)

[%20SCRI%20aims%20to%20create,if%20needed%2C%20in%20due%20course.](https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1714362#:~:text=The%20SCRI%20aims%20to%20create,if%20needed%2C%20in%20due%20course.)

<sup>xix</sup> <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/ifc-ior/about-us.html>

<sup>xx</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1557074>

<sup>xxi</sup> “India and Australia recognise the importance of global cooperation for saving lives and managing the economic impacts of COVID-19, and future global challenges. We will share the benefits of scientific and medical research and development, strengthen healthcare systems, and reflect on the recommendations of the independent and comprehensive evaluation of the international health response to COVID-19 to improve capacity for global pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.” Mentioned in the [Joint Comprehensive Strategy](#) document.