Anchoring ties with Canberra the virtual way

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Introduction

New Delhi ranks extremely high on Australia’s diplomatic radar.

A former Premier of New South Wales and a celebrated public figure, Mr. O’Farrell (the New High Commissioner) 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.

Relations with much potential

# 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.

**Pandemic control lessons**

# 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.

# 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.

**Higher education**

# 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.

# The virtual summit, in this sense, could not have been better timed.