For most of the postwar era, the map of Asian power ran through a familiar set of capitals: Washington, Beijing, Tokyo. India sat, geographically and strategically, off to the side—a subcontinental power preoccupied with its own neighborhood, its relationships with Australia and New Zealand cordial but thin, sustained more by cricket, curry houses and Commonwealth nostalgia than by any shared strategic project. That era is over. In the space of roughly a decade, and with startling acceleration in just the last five years, India has stitched itself into the economic and security architecture of the South Pacific and the Tasman Sea, transforming Canberra and Wellington from peripheral friendships into central partnerships in what is now unmistakably New Delhi's own vision of Indo-Pacific order.

This matters well beyond South Asia. The reordering of India's ties with Australia and New Zealand is a case study in how middle powers, acting in concert, are beginning to write the rules of a region that was once assumed to be the exclusive preserve of Washington and Beijing. It is a story with implications for anyone who ships goods through the Malacca Strait, invests in critical minerals, or simply has a stake in whether the Indo-Pacific remains open or fractures into competing spheres of coercion.

Until the early 2010s, India's strategic gaze rarely wandered south of Southeast Asia. Its "Look East" policy, later rebranded "Act East," was designed mainly to reconnect with ASEAN economies and manage China's rise along its immediate periphery. Australia and New Zealand were not absent from this picture so much as they were assumed—friendly democracies, useful at the margins, but not essential to India's core calculations.

That assumption has been dismantled. As India's regional ambitions expanded to encompass the East Asia Summit, the Pacific Islands Forum and the vast maritime commons stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the South Pacific, Canberra and Wellington were reclassified from bystanders to load-bearing pillars. The catalyst was not sentiment but necessity: a shared unease, shared with much of the region, about a more assertive China projecting power through opaque security deals, aggressive naval posturing and coercive economic leverage. Three democracies with overlapping maritime interests and no appetite for a Cold War-style bloc found it made sense to start building things together.

The Australia relationship: trade as strategy

The clearest evidence of this shift lies in the numbers. The interim India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, signed in 2022, helped more than double bilateral merchandise trade in just two years, and while volumes have since moderated, both governments have set a public target of AUD 100 billion in trade by 2030—an ambition that would have seemed fanciful a decade ago. What makes this trade relationship strategically significant, rather than merely commercially pleasant, is its composition. Australia supplies India with the critical minerals that will determine who wins the next phase of the energy transition and advanced manufacturing; India, in turn, is emerging as a source of engineering goods, chemicals and increasingly sophisticated exports. Businesses on both sides are voting with their wallets: preferential tariff provisions under the agreement are being used by a large majority of eligible exporters, a sign that this is lived economic integration rather than a ribbon-cutting exercise.

But the more consequential shift has occurred in defense. Australian officials now describe India as a top-tier security partner, and the numbers back the rhetoric: defense interactions between the two countries roughly tripled over the past decade. In 2023, India sent one of its indigenously built submarines to dock at an Australian naval base—the first such visit in history, and a quiet but unmistakable signal of undersea trust between two navies that, not so long ago, barely exercised together. Joint drills, senior ministerial visits, and a 2020 “Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation” that commits both nations to freedom of navigation and a rules-based order under international maritime law have turned what was once a sparse defense relationship into one of India’s most substantive military partnerships outside its immediate neighborhood.

Underpinning all of this is India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, a framework New Delhi unveiled in 2019 to organize cooperation around maritime ecology, security, connectivity and disaster response. Australia has become one of the initiative’s most active partners, co-funding research on marine plastic pollution and resilient port infrastructure. This is a telling detail: India is not simply accepting a seat at tables built by others. It is building its own tables, and inviting Australia to help set them.

New Zealand: the quieter but no less real convergence

If the Australia relationship illustrates rapid militarization of ties, New Zealand's story is one of a slower-burning but equally significant strategic awakening. Wellington's relationship with New Delhi was, for decades, defined by a large and vibrant Indian diaspora—now estimated at some 300,000 people—and modest, unglamorous trade. That began to change as New Zealand watched China's growing footprint in the Pacific Islands, including security arrangements with island states and naval drills uncomfortably close to New Zealand's own waters, and concluded that diversification away from overreliance on Beijing was not optional but urgent.

The economic transformation has been striking. Indian exports to New Zealand crossed the $600 million mark for the first time in 2024, up sharply from just five years earlier, flipping a historical trade deficit into a consistent Indian surplus. After a false start in 2009, comprehensive free trade talks resumed in 2025 and culminated in an agreement that New Zealand's own officials have called a once-in-a-generation deal—one carefully calibrated to protect India's politically sensitive agricultural sector while giving New Zealand exporters meaningfully greater access. By 2026, the relationship had been formally upgraded to a strategic partnership, complete with a roadmap to double bilateral trade by 2030 and a New Zealand pledge to invest some $20 billion in India over fifteen years.

Security cooperation has followed a similar trajectory, moving from near-nonexistent to substantive in a remarkably short window. The two countries have signed agreements on reciprocal logistics support between their navies, hydrographic cooperation, and a joint working group on terrorism—with New Zealand explicitly endorsing India's zero-tolerance stance on cross-border attacks. Wellington has also thrown its weight behind India's long-standing bids for permanent membership on a reformed UN Security Council and for entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, a diplomatic gesture that signals New Zealand now views India as a stakeholder in global governance, not merely a distant trading partner.

Why this is more than a regional story

It would be easy to read all of this as a tidy regional narrative: three democracies, uneasy about China, drawing closer together. That reading is not wrong, but it understates what is actually happening. India is not simply joining an anti-China coalition; it is using these bilateral relationships to build a distinct architecture of its own, one organized around functional cooperation rather than military alliance.

This distinction matters. India has pointedly avoided formal alliance structures, preferring instead a lattice of overlapping initiatives—the Quad with the United States, Japan and Australia; its own Oceans Initiative; bilateral logistics and defense pacts with individual partners. In May 2026, Quad foreign ministers agreed to launch a new maritime security cooperation framework extending joint surveillance into the Indian Ocean and explicitly condemning interference with commercial shipping through global chokepoints. India is slated to lead a maritime surveillance mission under this framework, while Australia will host a counterterrorism exercise focused on drone threats. These are not symbolic gestures. They are operational commitments that knit India into the day-to-day management of Indo-Pacific security in a way that would have been unthinkable when the Quad was first revived in 2017.

The significance lies less in any single agreement than in what the pattern reveals about the emerging shape of international order. The post-Cold War assumption was that rising, non-Western powers would either join an American-led system or build a rival to it. India’s approach with Australia and New Zealand suggests a third path: a coalition of middle powers cooperating issue by issue—on critical minerals, on maritime plastic pollution, on submarine visits, on counterterrorism—without binding themselves to any single hierarchy. If this model succeeds, it offers a template other regions might study: how to build resilience and deterrence without forcing every country to choose a single patron.

The risks that remain

None of this is without friction. Agricultural liberalization remains politically

combustible in India, and New Zealand's dairy sector will keep pressing for more access than New Delhi is likely to grant quickly. Australia's critical minerals exports to India, while growing, still lag the scale needed to meaningfully de-risk either country's supply chains from Chinese dominance in processing and refining. And the diplomatic goodwill on display at recent summits has yet to be tested by a genuine crisis—a maritime incident, a cyberattack, an act of coercion against a Pacific Island state—that would reveal whether these partnerships can deliver more than joint statements.

There is also a structural tension worth naming honestly. India's insistence on strategic autonomy—its refusal to be pinned down as an American ally in the traditional sense—gives it flexibility, but it also means its partners in Canberra and Wellington cannot fully predict how New Delhi will act in a genuine confrontation. Australia's alliance with Washington is unambiguous; India's posture, by design, is not. That ambiguity is a feature for New Delhi and arguably a source of quiet unease for its partners.

A more plural Indo-Pacific

Still, the trajectory is unmistakable. A decade ago, describing India, Australia and New Zealand as co-architects of Indo-Pacific order would have struck most observers as premature at best. Today it is simply a description of what has already happened: submarines docking in new ports, free trade agreements replacing decades of stalled talks, oceans initiatives funding real research, and three governments explicitly describing each other not as junior partners in someone else's strategy but as joint authors of the rules that will govern the world's most economically vital waters.

The stakes of this realignment extend well past the Indian Ocean and the Tasman Sea. Every economy that depends on open sea lanes, secure supply chains and a rules-based order rather than coercion has an interest in whether this experiment in middle-power cooperation holds. If India, Australia and New Zealand can keep building practical, functional cooperation rather than sliding into zero-sum blocs, they will have demonstrated something valuable for a world anxiously searching for alternatives to a binary choice between Washington and Beijing: that a more plural,

networked order is not just a diplomat’s aspiration, but something that can actually be built, one submarine visit and one trade deal at a time.