

VOL  
**57**



Forging innovative  
partnerships: Australia-  
India cooperation for  
climate development and  
security in the Pacific

**Ambika Vishwanath**



## INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2025

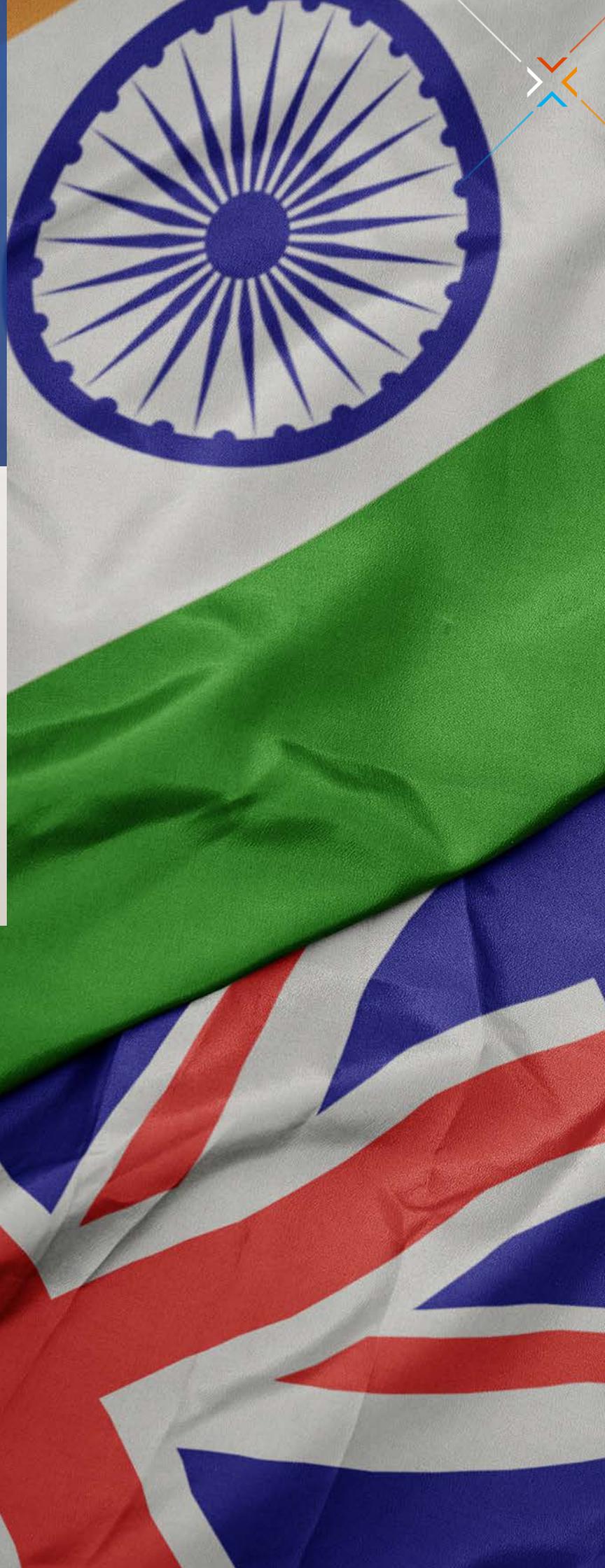
The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



AUTHOR

**Ambika Vishwanath**  
Principal Research Fellow,  
La Trobe Asia, Founding  
Director, Kubernein Initiative

Ambika is a Principal Research Fellow at La Trobe Asia and the Founder Director of Kubernein Initiative in India. She is a geopolitical expert and works at the intersection of emerging security challenges, climate security, and foreign policy. While in Australia she has been researching climate and security partnerships between India, Australia and the Pacific Region as a DFAT funded *Maitri* fellow.







# KEY MESSAGES

- 1** As Australia and India move into the next five years of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, they have the opportunity to align closely on climate related security and innovative development efforts in the Pacific.
- 2** It is necessary to move from reacting in isolation to climate events, to instead considering how climate events compound and cascade. This is integral for both understanding future risk and building resilience.
- 3** Triangular cooperation between Australia, India, and partners in the Pacific offers new and innovative ways to target development gaps. By combining resources, knowledge, and skills, there is an opportunity to drive aid that is sustainable, effective, and locally owned.
- 4** Gender inclusive approaches to development can be transformational, effectively contributing towards short- and medium-term adaptation strategies. While Australia and India have different approaches to gender development, this is an important area of future cooperation.

The climate crisis was top of agenda at the September 2025 Pacific Islands Forum – reflecting the region’s deep concern and vulnerability to climate change. The impacts of the climate crisis in the Pacific have been echoed by data for years. The World Meteorological Organisation found in their 2023 report that the sea surface temperature in the South-West Pacific has risen three times faster than the 1980 global average. At the same time, marine heatwaves have doubled in frequency, are more intense, and last longer.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change’s effects are also cascading, affecting the wider region and the communities dependant on these oceans and lands. Added to this are the geopolitical uncertainties and challenges playing out in the region.

The 2018 Boe Declaration<sup>2</sup> recognised climate change as the single greatest threat to Pacific security, where climate-induced environmental stressors are intensifying traditional security vulnerabilities. This is across civilian and military infrastructure, where extreme weather events and hazards directly threaten strategic units and installations, impair operations, and require costly upkeep. Climate impacts that disrupt military facilities also affect humanitarian response capabilities. This is in turn leading to a cycle of increased military presence to meet humanitarian demands, a presence that is not always welcome. Climate change is not only hampering the region’s development and growth potential but also affecting the security of these countries and the broader region.

**This nexus highlights the need for a comprehensive climate-resilient and future-forward framework, as well as partnerships that spearhead growth and ensure long term human, environmental, and regional security.**

To combat these compounding vulnerabilities, a fundamental shift in how traditional aid and partnerships are deployed and managed in the Pacific is needed. Crucially, there is a need for development that is collaborative and rooted in resilience and adaptation for long-term security. Resilience and adaptation are valuable for long term projects such as critical infrastructure, private sector growth, education, or health care. At its core, climate resilience should encompass a wider, more proactive, and inclusive approach. This requires a more localised way of thinking, where aspects of history, culture, community, and gender inclusivity are also factored in.

**As new partners in the Pacific, India and Australia have an opportunity to drive this shift with the region, rather than for it.**

This can range from ensuring Pacific island nations have input in their development through triangular cooperation; bringing a deeper climate understanding into defence and military strategies; or to projects that have a stronger gender focus to ensure a more inclusive approach to development and security.

**Innovating partnerships and opportunities for India and Australia**

A fundamental shift in how partnerships are developed, deployed, and managed in the Pacific is needed for transformation to be truly bottom up, locally owned, and sustainable.

Aid and development assistance have traditionally been rooted in approaches that stem from the – primarily western – donor’s understanding of a region or country. Often this has been to advance their own soft power goals, use aid as a means to correct historic and colonial grievances, or both. Outcomes are usually measured in economic efficiency over environmental or social justice and while this is changing, a more nuanced shift is needed (see Box 1).

**BOX 1 What Pacific island nations need from donors: the challenge of rising sea levels**

Islands and atoll nations are facing threats such as flooding due to rising sea levels or food insecurity due to dwindling fish stocks. They need smarter adaptation methods combined with development needs and not just an over emphasis on mitigation, as traditional donors tend towards.

For example, studies indicate that, in 12 Pacific island countries, 57 per cent of built infrastructure is within 500 meters of the coastline, emphasizing the region’s vulnerability to sea level changes.<sup>3</sup> This is seen in countries such as Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Fiji and others, where commercial and other infrastructure built close to the coastline on soft soil face higher risks from climate events, sea level rise, and related factors. Adaptation strategies funded by donors need to consider future climate risks while planning for development activities that are island specific, especially along these vulnerable coastlines.



**As Australia and India move into the next phase of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, there is a real opportunity to address this need, align policies, and define what strong middle powers can achieve for long-term human and environmental security.**

This is especially important in such uncertain times. Both countries offer experience in the development space, and can learn best practices from India's initiatives and from Australia's long-standing aid program. In doing so, the two countries can identify convergences and gaps in both policy and capability.

In particular, India has been taking a lead in developing coalitions across the Global South, presenting attractive alternatives in methodology and approach. India is creating a culture of allyship with developing nations that is useful and can be smartly combined with Australia's larger investments to ensure that the underlying values of equity, inclusion, and justice remain paramount to development projects. Triangular cooperation is one such approach.

**TRIANGULAR COOPERATION: A MORE NUANCED APPROACH TO AID**

In a developing region like the Pacific, the scale of international aid can at times exceed local capacity to implement it effectively. Technical assistance is often criticised for its use of expensive international consultants as well as the dominant role played by global, often western, firms, resulting in accusations of 'boomerang aid' that primarily benefits donors such as Australia, rather than recipient countries.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to realise that many programs and projects do not last beyond short term cycles due to the lack of capacity within recipient countries.

To streamline and more effectively use aid, triangular partnerships and minilateral approaches can be useful. Triangular cooperation in this context refers to cooperation between India, Australia, and a country or regional organisation in the Pacific where localised expertise, resources, and traditional knowledge are combined. This approach offers many advantages. Some of the main benefits are resource-pooling, cost-effectiveness, less duplication, and combining the unique comparative advantages of each contributor. While triangular cooperation is relatively new in global models and has had mixed success, it allows for a focus on areas often deemed too small for bigger donors. It also ensures that the recipient country is a core stakeholder. A triangular approach allows for participants to use their unique mix of expertise and experiences to tackle new and emerging challenges, going beyond what traditional bilateral donor-recipient programs have offered.

However, for triangular partnerships, it is important to ensure that there is a clear need or request from the recipient country and that development projects are designed and implemented in a way that is sustainable in the long term. It is also equally necessary to ensure that these partnerships are not only seen through the lens of strategic competition.<sup>5</sup> This can be achieved by working together to ensure that there is a clear connection between long-term growth and development and adaptation projects, and that the agency of these projects is in the hands of local partner countries.

Australia and India are well positioned to work together within this triangular cooperation framework, building on the five years of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which emphasises smart action towards climate change and the green transition. Both countries can harness these shared priorities to bring a new perspective to the region and move away from old models of aid and development.

**This is a real opportunity to adapt the successes of India's triangular climate cooperation model, which emphasises nuanced south-south cooperation to build greater trust (see Box 2).**

## BOX 2 Examples of India's triangular climate cooperation model

In 2024, India and Japan collaborated to facilitate a Sri Lankan delegation's visit to Himachal Pradesh in northern India. The trip aimed to give the delegation a comprehensive understanding of the impact of community-led institutions towards women's economic empowerment, combining knowledge, expertise, and resources for women, climate, and economic development.<sup>6</sup> The program was significant for the delegation and for furthering India and Japan's cooperation efforts with third countries.

Similarly, India's push for greater global cooperation on solar energy has also led to numerous projects within the umbrella of the International Solar Alliance, in partnership with regional and local actors. A collaborative initiative between India and France, the International Solar Alliance is an intergovernmental organisation aimed at combatting climate change through solar energy initiatives. In the Pacific region there are solar energy projects in Fiji, Tuvalu, and Kiribati.

Building local capacity through triangular cooperation can be far more effective in the long term. India can partner with Australia to fill capacity gaps through its technical training assistance, grants, and scholarships for managerial positions through Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programs (ITEC)<sup>7</sup>. There is also an opportunity to expand existing India-Australia skill development programs to create centres of excellence within Pacific countries and contribute to a growing cadre of national experts that can act as focal points for all climate related research, analysis, and management. This can also assist Pacific island governments to leverage local resources and knowledge. Cooperation that complements development with climate adaptation and is focused on smaller projects can be easily scaled up. Similar programs exist within other global bodies, such as the International Solar Alliance, and can be adapted to suit Pacific context and needs.

### Existing and emerging opportunities for Australia-India collaboration in the Pacific

INDIAN TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION PROGRAMME (ITEC)	ITEC is a leading capacity building platform by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Instituted in 1964, ITEC has trained over 225,000 professionals in both civilian and defence sectors from 160 countries. <sup>8</sup>
AUSTRALIA INDIA FUTURE SKILLS INITIATIVE (FSI)	The FSI is an Austrade program that helps Australian skills and training organisations (such as universities and technical colleges) identify and develop strategic partnership opportunities in India. FSI facilitates collaboration between Australian skill training providers and Indian universities to support India's emerging labour force <sup>9</sup> . Collaborative skill development programs like FSI could be expanded upon to include Pacific partners.
CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE	An organisation that provides leadership, expertise, research, and training on a focus area. Helping to establish climate development-focused centres of excellence in the Pacific would allow for projects to be informed by local expertise as well as international aid, with an aim of leading to greater sustainability beyond the funding period <sup>10</sup> .



## A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO SECURITY: GENDER INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO DISASTER RESPONSE

To promote more sustainable development in the Pacific islands, it is essential to prioritise inclusivity – especially when addressing climate development and the security challenges posed by climate change. Gender is a key aspect of this approach.

Australia and India have different approaches to gender when it comes to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and post disaster training, both potentially useful and complementary for Pacific nations. In Australia's recent gender equality strategy<sup>11</sup>, a key priority was equity in climate action and humanitarian responses. This is a reinforcement and continuation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's 2023 policy that mandates all investments over \$3 million must include a gender equality objective.<sup>12</sup> The strategy also outlined the importance of working with diverse Indo-Pacific groups on adaptation and resilience.

While these strategies point to a core goal of mainstreaming gender equality, finer details are still ambiguous. It is also important to note that often in developing nations such as Pacific countries where capacity is limited, smaller projects are easier for countries to manage and sustain. However, from a donor perspective, projects that do not reach the minimum financial benchmark risk not being inclusive. In those cases, it would be useful to look at India's experience of gender-sensitive projects and programs (see Box 2) that are often smaller in scale and work to fill the gaps that Australia's larger programs do not reach.

One area to trial this could be in the space of HADR, clearly outlined as a priority for both governments. Natural disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity in the context of climate change, and defence establishments throughout the world have been increasingly called upon to engage in disaster relief operations, at home and abroad. The Indian Army has been deployed for relief operations in Nepal, Fiji, and Mozambique, while the Australian Army has supported recovery efforts across the Pacific and is looking to expand ties in the Indian Ocean. The existing interoperability from bilateral and multilateral exercises could help enable more coordinated deployments.

But military involvement raises complex and at times controversial questions. These include how these operations fit with traditional defence commitments, issues around resourcing, and the relationship between defence and civilian agencies in disaster response – especially when women and vulnerable sections of society face the brunt of these disasters. India and Australia could better use the growing number of women in their armed forces to contribute towards gender focused responses and sensitive post disaster recovery. For example, the National Disaster Response Forces<sup>13</sup>, India's specialised paramilitary forces for disaster response, are now mandated to have at least 108 women per battalion.<sup>14</sup>

**Integrating a gendered perspective into disaster management can strengthen an entire community's resilience, especially when indigenous ideas and a bottom-up approach are instituted.<sup>15</sup>**

## Conclusion

Climate change poses a significant threat to the Pacific islands, one which has cascading effects across both development and security. Given the critical nature of this challenge, aid strategies must evolve to become more sustainable and focused on long-term adaptation, rather than solely on mitigation. To address this, Australia and India have an opportunity to reimagine their engagement in the Pacific islands by adopting innovative and adaptive approaches to development assistance.

### KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA AND INDIA:

- ▶ **Australia and India need to recognise that the next stage of the partnership can and should go beyond a siloed approach to climate, peace, and prosperity in the Pacific region.** The two countries have the skills, knowledge, and capabilities to work with regional partners more efficiently.
- ▶ **Triangular cooperation is a useful and easy to implement approach for streamlining development projects and efficiently allocating aid.** This approach allows for all involved partners to pool resources and fill capability gaps, will boost India's capacity, and will help Australia more effectively allocate aid. This approach also ensures that the recipient country has more agency and that projects are informed by community needs. Triangular cooperation efforts can also work within existing development programs and priorities, as outlined by regional forums, to boost economic multilateralism, build long term resilience, and ensure that efforts are scalable.
- ▶ **Further strengthen gender-informed development practices.** Gendered perspectives in areas such as disaster management – where women often experience the brunt of these crises – can help boost the resilience of whole communities.
- ▶ **HADR might be considered an obvious area of cooperation, but while many efforts exist within this broader banner, there is scope to expand its research, thinking, and implementation.** This aligns with recent strategic thinking. The October 2025 Defence Ministers Dialogue<sup>16</sup> in Australia outlined priority areas, including in the maritime domain, where a more nuanced and robust climate security lens could be instituted to safeguard personnel, systems, and local communities.

Enhancing planning and coordination with local and regional partners, especially on non-traditional security efforts, can have positive cascading impacts. As Australia and India's growing strategic alignment is moving into an operations phase, it has the potential to transform the bilateral relationship and ensure a more innovative approach to climate development and aid in the broader Pacific region.



## Endnotes

- 1 United Nations (2024), 'Surging Seas in a warming world: The latest science on present-day impacts and future projections of sea-level rise', [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/slr\\_technical\\_brief\\_26\\_aug\\_2024.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/slr_technical_brief_26_aug_2024.pdf)
- 2 Pacific Islands Forum (2023), 'New Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide will put Boe Declaration into Action', <https://forumsec.org/publications/release-new-pacific-climate-security-assessment-guide-will-put-boe-declaration-action>
- 3 Kumar, L. & Taylor, S. (2015), 'Exposure of coastal built assets in the South Pacific to climate risks', *Nature Climate Change*, 5, 992-996, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate2702>
- 4 Rae, M. (2024), 'Exposure of coastal built assets in the South Pacific to climate risks', *The Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8817095/pacific-nations-dont-want-boomerang-aid-for-climate/>
- 5 Chakrabarty, M. & Prabhu, S. (2022), 'Triangular Development Partnerships are the need of the hour', *Observer Research Foundation*, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/triangular-development-partnerships-are-the-need-of-the-hour>
- 6 Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (2024), 'Sri Lankan delegation visit Himachal Pradesh to learn success of women's economic empowerment', [https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/india/information/press/2024/1545260\\_53431.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/india/information/press/2024/1545260_53431.html)
- 7 Ministry of External Affairs (n.d.), 'The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC)', *Government of India*, <https://www.itecgoi.in/index>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Australian Trade and Investment Commission (n.d.), 'Australia-India Future Skills Initiative', *Australian Government*, <https://www.austrade.gov.au/en/how-we-can-help-you/programs-and-services/south-asia-business-exchange/australia-india-business-exchange/australia-india-future-skills-initiative>
- 10 Deakin University (2025), 'Deakin University Strengthens India-Australia Collaboration for Disaster Resilience with Landmark Centre of Excellence and Strategic MoU', <https://www.prnewswire.com/in/news-releases/deakin-university-strengthens-india-australia-collaboration-for-disaster-resilience-with-landmark-centre-of-excellence-and-strategic-mou-302404539.html>
- 11 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (n.d.), 'Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy', *Australian Government*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australias-international-gender-equality-strategy>
- 12 Desai, I. (2025), 'How Australia is advancing gender equality in the Indo-Pacific', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-australia-is-advancing-gender-equality-in-the-indo-pacific/>
- 13 National Disaster Response Force (n.d.), 'About Us', *Government of India*, <https://www.ndrf.gov.in/about-us>
- 14 Bhide, P. (2022), 'How Australia is advancing gender equality in the Indo-Pacific', *Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition*, <https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-issues-paper-Gendering-the-Indo-Pacific-Dialogue-FINAL.pdf>
- 15 Vishwanath, A. (2023), 'A case for India-Australia climate and human security cooperation in the Pacific Islands', *Australia India Institute*, <https://aai.unimelb.edu.au/a-case-for-india-australia-cooperation-in-the-pacific-islands/#:~:text=Triangular%20cooperation%20also%20extends%20to,organisational%20cohesiveness%20and%20logistical%20capacity.>
- 16 Australian Government (2025), 'Joint Statement on the 2025 Australia-India Defence Ministers' Dialogue', <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-10-09/joint-statement-2025-australia-india-defence-ministers-dialogue>

## About the Perth USAsia Centre

The Perth USAsia Centre is a leading think tank focused on Indo-Pacific strategy. Through our research and educational activities, we strengthen relationships and strategic thinking between Australia, the Indo-Pacific, and the United States. Based at the University of Western Australia, we are a non-partisan and not-for profit institution. We engage thought leaders across government, business, and academia to address challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the Centre's inception in 2013, we have informed a broad and diverse community of over 30,000 at more than 800 events across 25 cities in 10 countries.

For more information, contact us via [perthusasiacentre@uwa.edu.au](mailto:perthusasiacentre@uwa.edu.au)

### Disclaimer

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in relation to the subject matter covered. It is provided on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering any form of professional or other advice or services. No person should rely on the contents of this publication without first obtaining advice from a qualified professional individual or agency.

### © Perth USAsia Centre 2025

This publication is subject to copyright. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without prior written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher. Notwithstanding the above, educational Institutions (including schools, independent colleges, universities, and TAFEs) are granted permission to make copies of copyrighted works strictly for educational purposes without explicit permission from the Perth USAsia Centre and free of charge.



perthusasia.edu.au



M265, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Old Economics Building, The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, Australia



Perth USAsia Centre  
INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

- @ perthusasiacentre@uwa.edu.au
- X @PerthUSAsia
- f PerthUSAsia
- in linkedin.com/company/perth-usasia-centre
- 📍 perthusasia.edu.au
- 📍 @perthusasiacentre