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Shallow Waters: Australia's Naval Engagement with the East African Coast

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- to contribute to regional engagement and the development of maritime strategic concepts
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Executive Summary

Australia's strategic focus is the Indo-Pacific. The events in this region shape Australia's foreign policy and defence decisions. However, not all regions in the Indo-Pacific are granted equal amounts of attention. This paper explores Australia's naval engagement in the Indian Ocean, concentrating specifically on the East African coastal subregion. This research has been motivated by Australia's minimal engagement with the East African coast and seeks to evaluate two main issues: first, if an increased naval presence in the region can provide further strategic opportunities for Australia; and second, whether Australia's modest engagement leaves it vulnerable to maritime threats, such as piracy. Current academic literature has failed to address these questions with regard to the East African coast. A variety of qualitative methodologies are employed in this research, including a content analysis of Australian strategic documents and a comparison of Japan's naval activities along the East African coast with Australia's. Ultimately, this paper finds that Australia's limited engagement with the East African coast is a critical oversight that constrains its ability to take advantage of opportunities, and defend its trade and national security against potential threats emanating from the region.

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Introduction

As tension and strategic competition escalate across the Indo-Pacific, the East African coast has increased in geopolitical relevance. The region contains vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as economic and strategic opportunities. Yet, the region has been overlooked in Australian strategic documents, which has translated to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) having a limited and sporadic presence in the region. While there have been general studies of Australia's engagement in the Indian Ocean, no studies have investigated Australia's engagement with this subregion.

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the RAN's involvement with the East African coast, and evaluating the opportunities afforded by deepening engagement and the consequences of ongoing absence. This paper contends that the RAN's modest presence on the East African coast is a notable blind spot in Australia's strategic posture and argues that it should deepen its naval engagement to secure influence and economic opportunities in the region, and protect its maritime trade, national security and vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The first section of this paper examines Australian engagement with the Indian Ocean and East African coast through a content analysis of salient strategic and defence policy documents. It then compares and contrasts Japan's naval activity in the region with that of Australia, to demonstrate how another regional power has addressed this issue. The second section assesses the opportunities that an enhanced RAN presence on the East African coast will provide, including the procurement of a sphere of influence and amplified economic prosperity. The third section then addresses the dangers associated with the RAN's continued absence, including threats to Australia's fuel supply chain and those relating to China's growing influence. The paper concludes by making several policy recommendations to increase the RAN's presence in the identified study area.

A Peripheral Vision: Australia's Naval Engagement with the East African Coast

Background to the Strategic and Economic Significance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has become a salient theatre of geopolitical competition in the 21st century. Covering approximately 73.5 million square kilometres, it is the third-largest ocean in the world.¹ Consisting of 23 sovereign nations², with a combined population of over 2.7 billion, the region is complex and congested, exhibiting diversity in cultures, political systems and economies.³ The relative decline of the United States (US) and the rise of China have altered the balance of

¹ Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, 'The Indian Ocean—Centre Stage for the 21st Century', in *Our Western Front: Australia and the Indian Ocean*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2010, p8, [jstor.org/stable/resrep04177.6](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04177.6).

² Kate O'Shaughnessy, 'Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean: Why Island States Matter', Perth USAsia Centre: IndoPacific Strategy, March 2025, perthusasia.edu.au/research-insights/strategic-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-why-island-states-ma.

³ Bateman and Bergin, 'The Indian Ocean—Centre Stage for the 21st Century', p10.

power in the region, transforming it into a multipolar arena, in which nations compete to assert control and influence, and project strength.⁴ States are engaged in this geopolitical competition as the Indian Ocean holds immense economic and strategic significance.

The region is home to some of the world's most important SLOCs, including the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Malacca Strait, the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal. Annually, more than one-third of the world's bulk cargo and half of all container ships sail through the region's waters, ensuring global access to energy, food and precious metals.⁵ Numerous Indian Ocean rim states, including those in the Persian Gulf region, are leading producers of crude oil. Subsequently, more than 80 per cent of global maritime oil transits through the region's waters.⁶ The US, Japan and various European countries are major consumers of this oil: the US imports 25 per cent of its total crude oil requirements from the region, with Japan importing 76 per cent and European countries importing 70 per cent.⁷ The Indian Ocean serves as an economic highway that connects Africa, the Middle East, West Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia, Australia, Europe and the Americas; as trade liberalisation continues to accelerate, the region's vitality will increase.

Australia and the Indian Ocean

With a coastline stretching over 14,000 kilometers and an exclusive economic zone of approximately 3.9 million square kilometers, Australia is geopolitically positioned to be a pre-eminent regional power.⁸ The Indian Ocean has a crucial role in Australia's trade infrastructure—over 50 per cent of its export sea freight, such as iron ore, transits through its SLOCs.⁹ Australia's dependence on the Indian Ocean is further accentuated by its depleted energy reserves: in 2021, Australia imported 91 per cent of its refined petroleum, a figure estimated to reach 100 per cent by 2030.¹⁰ Historically, Australia's strategic attention has focused on the

⁴ David Brewster, 'Introduction', in *Cross Currents: The New Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean*, Canberra: ANU National Security College, 2024, p1, nsc.anu.edu.au/content-centre/research/cross-currents-new-geopolitics-indian-ocean.

⁵ Troy Lee-Brown, 'Australia and the Provision of Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean: Mobilising Regional Partnerships and Leveraging the Alliance', *Black Swan Strategy Papers*, no 11, 2023, p9, defenceuwa.com.au/publications/black-swan-strategy-papers/.

⁶ Pat Conroy, *Address to the Indian Ocean Defence and Security Conference* [speech transcript], Department of Defence, 24 July 2024, minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2024-07-24/address-indian-ocean-defence-and-security-conference.

⁷ Dennis Rumley, Sanjay Chaturvedi and Mat Taib Yasin, *The Security of Sea Lanes of Communication in the Indian Ocean Region*, Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2016, pp117–118.

⁸ David Brewster, 'The Second Sea: Australia's Approach to the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific', in David Brewster, *Australia's Second Sea: Facing Our Multipolar Future in the Indian Ocean*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019, p9, [jstor.org/stable/resrep23065.5](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23065.5).

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 'Submission 12. Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories: Inquiry into the Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Territories', DFAT, 2017, p6, aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=bd0ba14c-766d-427b-a88e-d8dbb9150fb8&subId=463150.

¹⁰ Liam Carter, Audrey Quicke and Alia Armistead, 'Over a Barrel', The Australia Institute, 21 April 2022, p8, australiainstitute.org.au/report/over-a-barrel/.

Pacific Ocean. Australia's limited involvement in the Indian Ocean is denoted through the absence of major warships being homeported in Western Australia until the late 1980s.¹¹

It is only over the past decade that Australia has begun to acknowledge the importance of the Indian Ocean. This shift in strategic thinking has been reflected through initiatives such as the 2022 pledge by the Australian Government to provide \$36.5 million to support maritime security and disaster management in the Indian Ocean¹², the emphasis on the Indo-Pacific in the *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023* (DSR) and the *2024 National Defence Strategy* (NDS), and Australia's hosting of the Indian Ocean Conference 2024, which was attended by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong. The RAN's engagement in the region primarily focuses on the north-east littorals and can be witnessed through operations, activities and exercises including Operation GATEWAY, the Indo-Pacific Endeavour and the AUSINDEX exercise.¹³

Additionally, the RAN makes regular port visits to north-east Indian Ocean countries such as Thailand. Comparatively, the RAN's presence in the Western Indian Ocean is substantially less extensive and primarily includes multilateral initiatives focused on counter-piracy. Examples of the RAN's engagement in the Western Indian Ocean include its participation in the Combined Task Force (CTF), leadership of CTF-153, participation in Operations MANITOU and OCEAN SHIELD, and the continuous deployment of a frigate on the edge of the region in the Middle East area of operations between 1990 and 2021.¹⁴ While Australia has not been absent in the Indian Ocean, its presence, particularly in the Western Indian Ocean, has been sporadic and lacks deep bilateral ties, preventing Australia from becoming a leading power in the Indian Ocean.

Australia and the East African Coast

Despite growing recognition of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, Australia's strategic policy continues to minimise the importance of the East African coast, even though it forms the country's western maritime frontier. The East African coast stretches from northern Mozambique to Somalia¹⁵ and includes the island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles (see Figure 1).¹⁶ Several critical maritime choke points are located in the region,

¹¹ Brewster, 'The Second Sea', p12.

¹² Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Enhancing Engagement in the North East Indian Ocean' [media release], Minister for Foreign Affairs, 11 February 2022, foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/enhancing-engagement-north-east-indian-ocean.

¹³ Jennifer Parker, 'Australia Needs to Step up in the western Indian Ocean', *The Strategist*, 22 August 2024, aspistrategist.org.au/australia-needs-to-step-up-in-the-western-indian-ocean/.

¹⁴ Royal Australian Navy, 'The Royal Australian Navy in the Middle East', Royal Australian Navy, navy.gov.au/about-navy/history/history-milestones/royal-australian-navy-middle-east.

¹⁵ Stephanie Wynne-Jones and Adria LaViolette, *The Swahili World*, London: Routledge, 2017, p19.

¹⁶ Aparajita Biswas, 'Engagement of China and India in the Western Indian Ocean Littoral and Island States of East Africa', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol 17(1), 2021, p22, doi: 10.1080/19480881.2021.1878581.

including the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Mozambique Channel.¹⁷ The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is located between the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula, linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ In 2024, approximately 4 million barrels of oil per day passed through its waters.¹⁹ Similarly, the Mozambique Channel, located between East Africa and the west coast of Madagascar, and the Gulf of Aden, bordered by Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, are important trade routes that transport energy supplies from the Gulf States.²⁰ These SLOCs are essential to Australia's fuel supply and broader economic stability, as any closures or disruptions to these choke points affect the nation's trade flows and generate economic repercussions.²¹

East Africa is also rich in natural resources such as coal, copper, diamonds, gold, iron and platinum.²² With over 170 Australian companies operating within the region and extracting resources, East Africa has become a significant economic partner.²³ Over the past decade, regional Indo-Pacific powers, such as China, India and Japan, have recognised the importance of the region and amplified their presence through the development of ports, investment in infrastructure and regular naval deployments. Yet, successive Australian governments continue to under-emphasise this strategic landscape,

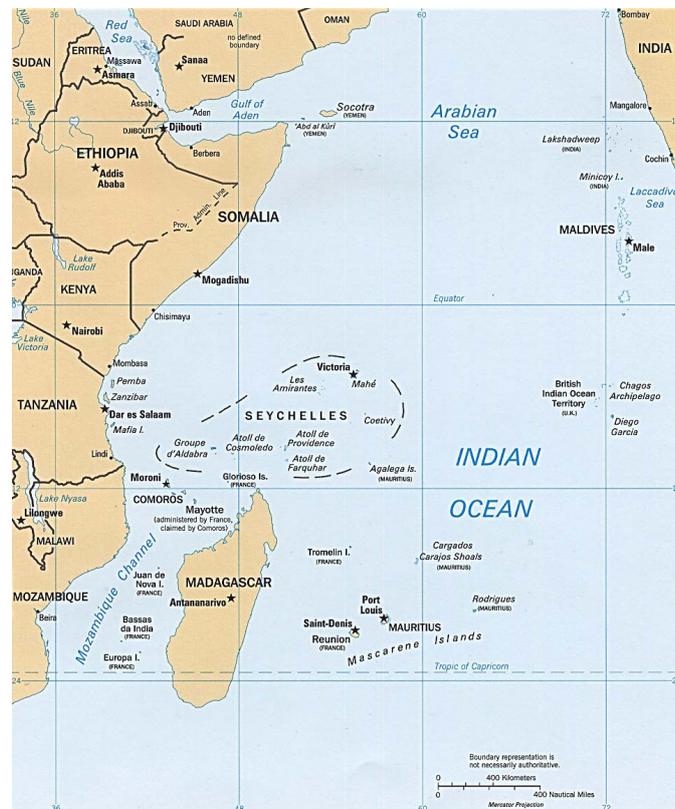


Figure 1. Map of the East African coast and its island states. Source: Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. Reproduced from maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/indian_ocean.html.

¹⁷ Sharmistha Hazra and Pranav Bhaskar, 'China's Strategic Presence in East African Ports: Implications for Indian Ocean Security', *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, vol 9(3), 2023, p505, doi: 10.47305/JLIA2393615h.

¹⁸ John Calabrese, 'The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Regional and Great Power Rivalries on the Shores of the Red Sea', Middle East Institute, 29 January 2020, mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea.

¹⁹ US Energy Information Administration (EIA), 'Fewer Tankers Transit the Red Sea in 2024', EIA, 11 October 2024, eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=63446.

²⁰ Simon Wilson and Rebecca Klaus, 'The Gulf of Aden', in Charles Sheppard (ed), *Seas at the Millennium: An Environmental Evaluation*, Oxford: Pergamon, 2000, p 49.

²¹ Hazra and Bhaskar, 'China's Strategic Presence in East African Ports', p505.

²² Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh and Jessica Greely, *Mapping the Indian Ocean Region*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023, p22, carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en.

²³ William Hicks and Pichamon Yeophantong, 'Why Africa Matters to Australia', UNSW, 6 May 2019, unsw.edu.au/news/2019/05/why-africa-matters-to-australia.

missing pivotal opportunities to secure Australia’s maritime frontier and trailing behind other powers in sculpting the future of the region.

Qualitative Analysis of Australia’s Engagement

An analysis of key terms in core Australian defence and foreign policy documents published between 1976 and 2024 reveals that the Indian Ocean has been given inadequate attention in comparison to the Pacific²⁴, with specific areas such as the East African coast being overlooked in strategic discourse (Figure 2). The documents examined include the Defence White Papers (1976, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2009, 2013 and 2016), the Foreign Policy White Papers (2003 and 2017), the DSR and the NDS. Key terms, such as ‘Africa’, ‘East Africa’, ‘Western Indian Ocean’, ‘Indian Ocean’²⁵, ‘Pacific’ and ‘Indo-Pacific’, were tracked to determine how frequently they appeared, how they were operationalised and what their usage revealed about Australia’s level of engagement in the region.

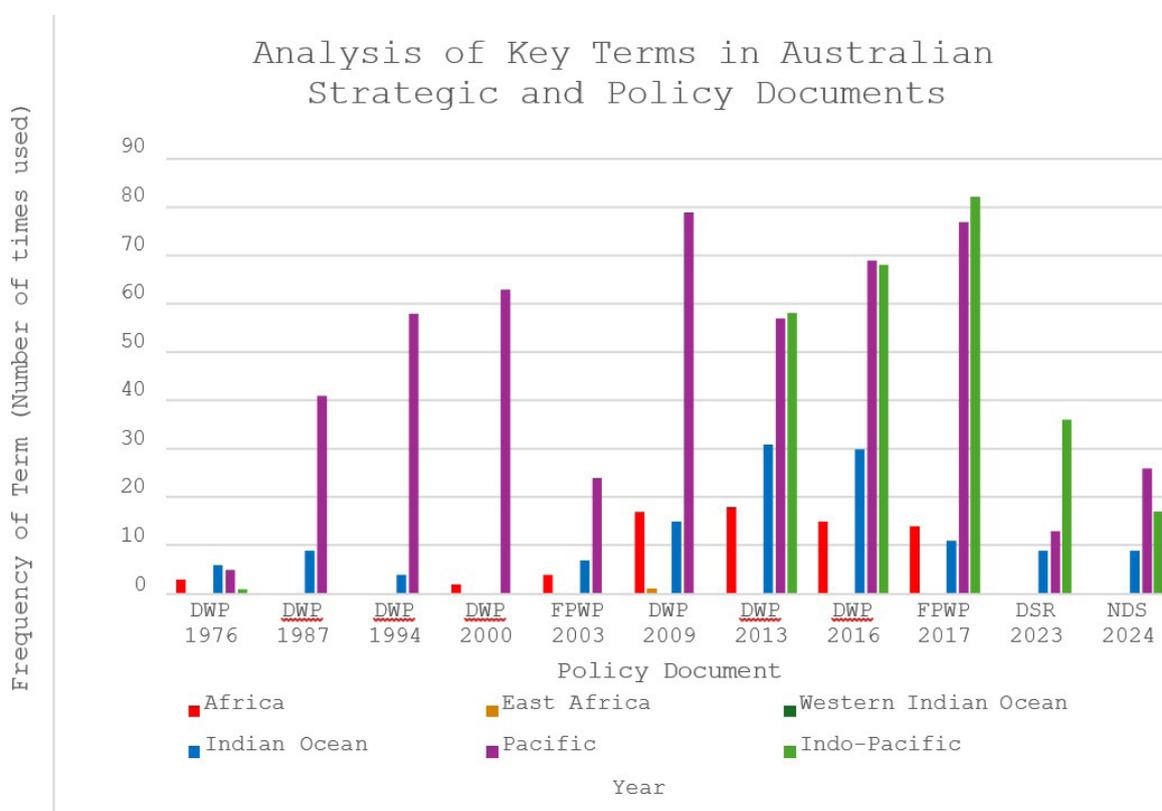


Figure 2. Content analysis of key Australian strategic and Defence documents.

The analysis unearthed a consistent emphasis on the Pacific. The term dominated the majority of documents and was used on 79 occasions in the 2009 Defence White Paper. In comparison, the Indian Ocean was discussed significantly less—in the 2009 Defence White Paper, the term appeared 15 times, and in the 2000 Defence White Paper, it was not mentioned at all. From this analysis, it is apparent that Australian strategic thinking and policymaking is focused

²⁴ In this content analysis, the term ‘Pacific’ encompasses all references to the Pacific Ocean and its subregions, including the South Pacific, Pacific Islands and adjacent maritime areas.

²⁵ In this content analysis, the term ‘Indian Ocean’ also encompasses references to the Indian Ocean Rim and Indian Ocean Region.

on the Pacific. The documents show a strategic shift, beginning in 2013, as Australia broadened its focus to frame the Indo-Pacific as the central theatre of its engagement. This conceptual reorientation is most clearly depicted in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, where the term 'Indo-Pacific' appeared 82 times, marking its institutional entrenchment in foreign policy discourse. Despite the Indo-Pacific being formally identified by the Australian Government as its primary strategic focus, the East African coast was largely omitted.

This is evidenced in Figure 3, a map of the Indo-Pacific reproduced from the DSR that excludes the east coast of Africa.²⁶ The omission of this subregion suggests that the Australian Government is interested in the core of the Indian Ocean, and engaging with powers such as India, but does not view the East African coast as part of its primary strategic focus. This exclusion is reflected by the fact that across all the noted strategic documents, East Africa is only mentioned once—in the 2009 Defence White Paper—demonstrating the longstanding oversight of the region. Moreover, the analysis of the documents revealed that Africa and East Africa were only mentioned in relation to the threats originating in the region. Throughout these documents, the Western Indian Ocean is not framed as being strategically relevant or viewed as a region warranting naval engagement. Collectively, these documents represent an ongoing trend of strategic oversight.

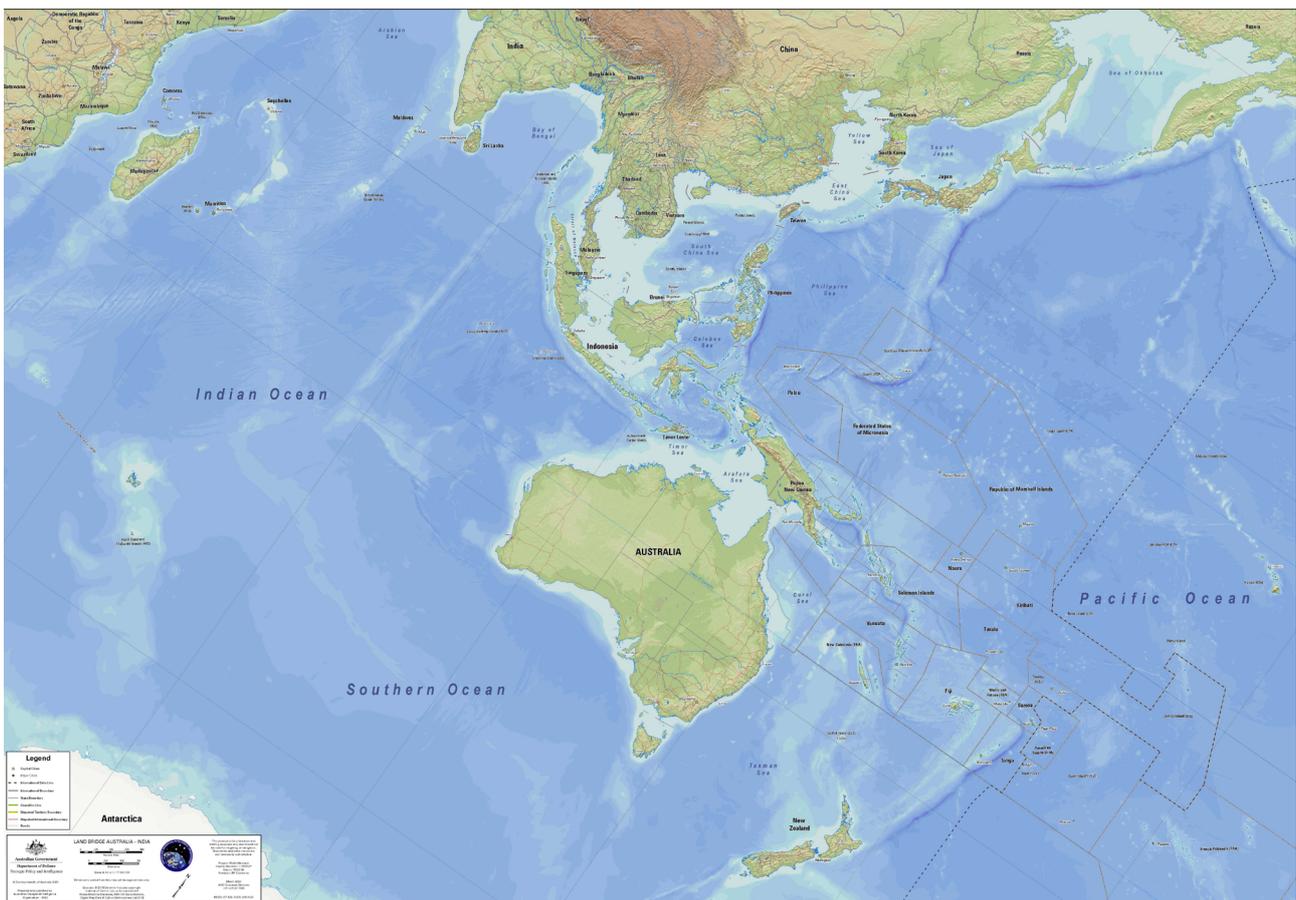


Figure 3. Map of the Indo-Pacific in the 2023 DSR.²⁷ Source: Department of Defence ©Commonwealth of Australia 2020.

²⁶ Department of Defence, 'National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023', Department of Defence, p27, defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review.

²⁷ Department of Defence, 'National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023', p27.

Australian Naval Activity on the East African Coast

Having surveyed all the relevant literature, my assessment is that Australia’s sporadic maritime engagement with the East African coast follows a distinct pattern where presence generates influence and absence results in disempowerment. Among key Indo-Pacific powers, Australia has recorded the lowest maritime engagement on the East African coast. Since 2000, RAN deployments have primarily occurred through multilateral frameworks (see Figure 4). These deployments include participation in Operation SLIPPER, which supported the US-led Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, and Operation MANITOU, through CTF-150, 151, 152 and 153, which have aimed to promote maritime security, stability and prosperity in the Middle East and East Africa.²⁸ In October 2024, Australia took brief command of the CTF-153, enabling it to shape security operations in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden region.²⁹ Additional engagements, such as the RAN’s participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Operation OCEAN SHIELD³⁰ and the US-led Exercise CUTLASS EXPRESS, contributed to counter-piracy efforts and strengthened maritime governance in the Western Indian Ocean.³¹

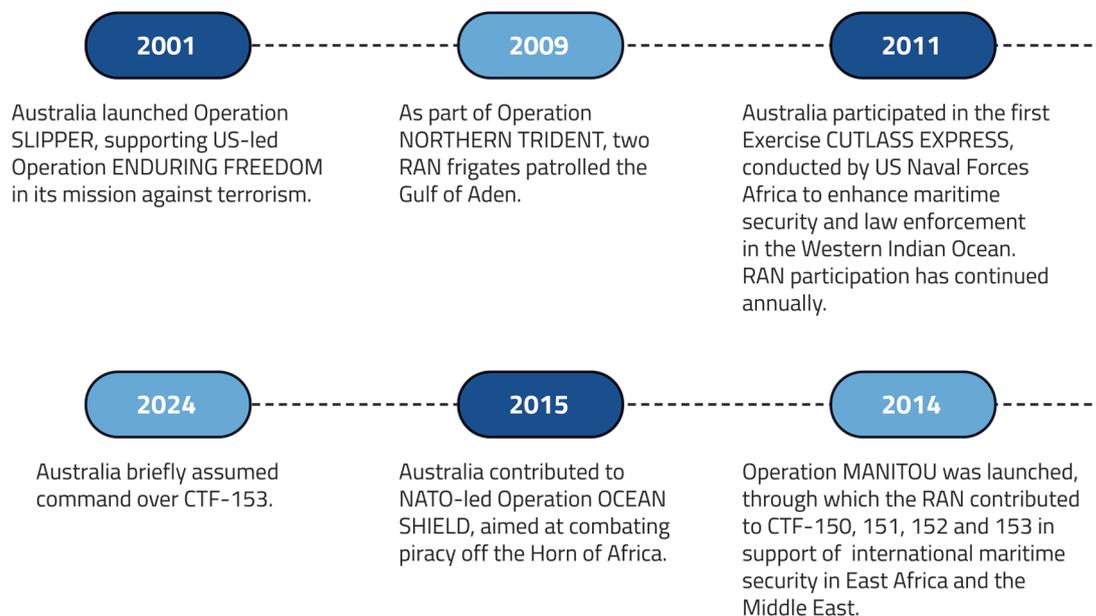


Figure 4. Timeline of RAN engagement with the East African coast since 2000.

These missions enhanced Australia’s reputation as a reliable contributor to maritime governance and demonstrated elements of Australia’s sea power—its capacity to conduct and influence

²⁸ Robert Dougherty, ‘Australia to Command Combined Task Force in Red Sea’, Defence Connect, 26 August 2024, defenceconnect.com.au/naval/14629-australia-to-command-combined-task-force-in-red-sea.

²⁹ Dougherty, ‘Australia to Command Red Sea Task Force’.

³⁰ Phillip Smart, ‘HMAS Success in NATO Counter Piracy Operation’, *Australian Defence Magazine*, 14 April 2015, australiandefence.com.au/news/hmas-success-in-nato-counter-piracy-operation?utm.

³¹ Andrew Herring, ‘Maritime Experts Join Forces for Safer Oceans’, Department of Defence, 28 February 2025, defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-02-28/maritime-experts-join-forces-safer-oceans?utm.

activities in, through and from the sea to achieve its objectives. By contributing to counter-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa and safeguarding commercial shipping, Australia upheld the rules-based global order and supported regional prosperity. However, the irregular nature of such deployments has limited Australia's ability to construct enduring bilateral relationships with East African states. Without a sustained naval presence, port access arrangements or long-term security cooperation agreements, Australia is arguably at risk of forfeiting its influence in a maritime domain that is increasingly being shaped by rival states. To the extent that maritime power underpins prosperity and regional stability, Australia's ad hoc approach leaves key sea lines vulnerable and partnerships exposed to competition from other parties. To remain a credible Indo-Pacific power, Australia must commit to a sustained naval presence along the East African coast.

Strategic Barriers to Australian Engagement

The reasons for the RAN's minimal engagement can be understood as a combination of perceptual biases, resource constraints, diplomatic inertia and weak multilateral institutions. First, the propagation of afro-pessimism has shaped policymakers' perceptions of Africa.³² Afro-pessimism is a lens, frequently adopted by civil societies, foreign powers and scholars, through which Africa is viewed as an anarchic and corrupt continent.³³ Despite Africa's growing demographic, economic and strategic relevance, afro-pessimism impedes individuals from regarding the continent as anything other than unstable and perpetually crisis-ridden. Subsequently, instead of viewing East Africa as a zone of strategic opportunity, Australian policymakers perceive the region as a sphere of instability and its countries as unreliable partners.³⁴

Second, Australia's engagement with the East African coast is restricted by resources and capabilities. The RAN possesses a modest force comprising around 50 vessels and approximately 16,000 personnel.³⁵ Its surface level fleet consists of three Hobart Class destroyers and ageing Anzac Class frigates, posing structural limitations to naval engagement in the Western Indian Ocean.³⁶ The RAN lacks the force structure to continuously operate along East Africa's coast. Moreover, the size constraints of the RAN's fleet mean it has to choose where to prioritise its deployment—the fleet is unable to effectively deploy simultaneously to both East Africa and the Pacific. With Australia's strategic attention focused on the Pacific Ocean,

³² David Mickler and Tanya Lyons, *New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Towards Africa*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2013, pp42–43.

³³ Mickler and Lyons, *New Engagement*, pp42–43.

³⁴ Mickler and Lyons, *New Engagement*, pp42–43. See also Tanya Lyons, 'Australian Foreign Policy towards Africa', in *Australia in World Affairs 2006–2010: Middle Power Dreaming*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp160–178, doi: 10.1017/9781009458528.013; Muhammad Dan Suleiman, Christopher Isike and David Mickler, "'No Colonial Baggage": Imagining a Decolonised Australia-Africa Relations', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, vol 69(3), September 2023, pp522–541, doi: 10.1111 ajph.12948.

³⁵ Sea Power Centre–Australia, 'Frigates', Sea Power Centre–Australia, seapower.navy.gov.au/fleet/vessels/frigates.

³⁶ Jennifer Parker, Special Report–An Australian Maritime Strategy: Resourcing the Royal Australian Navy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 2023, p5, www.aspi.org.au/report/australian-maritime-strategy/.

due to increased economic integration and alliance-driven priorities, policymakers have chosen to commit the majority of RAN resources to this region and have not prioritised the coast of East Africa.³⁷ The RAN's capability constraints are likely to persist for the foreseeable future, as Australia is focused on acquiring nuclear-powered submarines with the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, diverting investment from surface level capabilities.³⁸

A third factor is that, historically, Australia has been strategically dependent on other nations—initially on the UK and later on the US—limiting the development of an autonomous and comprehensive regional strategy.³⁹ Consequently, Australia has displayed diminished diplomatic attention towards Africa, possessing only nine diplomatic missions—embassies and high commissions—on the continent. This limited diplomatic engagement prevents the Australian Government from maintaining the political relationships and strategic partnerships necessary to enable sustained naval activity, resulting in intermittent deployments.

Finally, the ineffective and inconsistent frameworks for maritime cooperation among the Indian Ocean's multilateral institutions have contributed to the RAN's modest presence on the East African coast. The Indian Ocean is made up of diverse actors with different capabilities and interests.⁴⁰ Various multilateral frameworks have been set up to foster cooperation between these actors, but have faced challenges in achieving this.⁴¹ The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is the primary multilateral organisation in the region. However, it is hampered by a lack of funding, resources and interest from member states.⁴² The IORA's weak institutional capacity ensures that there is little follow-through on decisions made.⁴³ Another important multilateral institution is the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). The purpose of the IONS is to increase maritime cooperation in the region through information flows, mutually beneficial agreements, common understandings of security issues and the provision of enhanced capabilities.⁴⁴ The IONS has been largely ineffective due to its non-binding nature, absence of a permanent secretariat, limited membership and consensus-driven decision-making that hinders

³⁷ Sea Power Centre—Australia, 'The Fleet', Sea Power Centre—Australia, seapower.navy.gov.au/fleet.

³⁸ Michael Shoebridge, 'Trouble in the Navy's Material World Is Trouble for Australia's Security – & AUKUS', Strategic Analysis Australia, 3 July 2025, strategicanalysis.org/trouble-in-the-navys-material-world-is-trouble-for-australias-security-aukus/.

³⁹ Faiza Samatar, 'Expanding the Indo-Pacific Region to East Africa', UWA Defence & Security Institute, 27 June 2022, defenceuwa.com.au/publications/policy-briefs/expanding-the-indo-pacific-region-to-east-africa.

⁴⁰ Bateman and Bergin, 'The Indian Ocean—Centre Stage for the 21st Century', p14.

⁴¹ Bateman and Bergin, 'The Indian Ocean—Centre Stage for the 21st Century', p14.

⁴² David Brewster, 'Stronger Institutions Sorely Needed in the Indian Ocean', East Asia Forum, 9 July 2019, eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/09/stronger-institutions-sorely-needed-in-the-indian-ocean/.

⁴³ Brewster, 'Stronger Institutions Sorely Needed in the Indian Ocean'.

⁴⁴ Ranendra Singh Sawan, *Problems and Prospects of Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region: A Case Study of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)*, Sea Power Centre—Australia, 12 March 2020, seapower.navy.gov.au/publications-and-research/problems-and-prospects-maritime-security-cooperation-indian-ocean-region-case-study-indian-ocean-naval-symposium-ions.

decisive action.⁴⁵ There are other institutions in the region, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. However, this forum primarily focuses on the north-east Indian Ocean, excluding the East African coast.⁴⁶ Consequently, Australia must foster cooperation through bilateral and multilateral partnerships, which incur high transaction costs and diminish the impetus for engagement, contributing to the RAN's sporadic naval activity in the region. Overall, it is these structural and strategic constraints, and not a lack of will, which help to explain the difficulties Australia faces in maintaining a sustained presence in the region. As denoted through its recent naval deployments and port visits along the East African coast, Australia has begun to reconfigure this approach.

Comparative Analysis: Japan's Engagement on the East African Coast

Many Indo-Pacific powers, including China, India and Japan, have recognised the strategic significance of the East African coast and have responded by deepening their naval engagement in the region. Since the late 2000s, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) has established a sustained presence on the East African coast. Consequently, the JMSDF offers a potent point of comparison to the RAN's minimal engagement. Japan shares a variety of similar characteristics with Australia, including its status as an Indo-Pacific middle power, membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and longstanding alliance with the US. However, the two nations are not peers in scale. Japan's economic and military capabilities are larger than Australia's. Japan's naval force possesses 150 vessels.⁴⁷ The construction and maintenance of this large fleet has been made possible by Japan's strong economy—the third-largest in the world. For the 2024–25 financial year, Japan's defence budget was set at JPY8.475 trillion (equivalent to approximately AUD87 billion).⁴⁸ Comparatively, Australia possesses a smaller naval force and its defence budget for the 2025–26 financial year is more modest at approximately \$56.6 billion.⁴⁹

Despite the differences in scale, a comparison of the two nations' engagement in the region is useful, as Japan's approach demonstrates what a successful sustained presence can achieve. In 2009, the JMSDF deployed its first counter-piracy task force to the Gulf of Aden to protect Japanese commercial shipping.⁵⁰ As shown in Figure 5, following this initial deployment, Japan has broadened its maritime engagement through unilateral, bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Japan has participated in numerous regional operations including the EU-led Operation ATLANTA,

⁴⁵ Sawan, *Problems and Prospects of Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*.

⁴⁶ David Brewster, 'Stronger Institutions Sorely Needed in the Indian Ocean'.

⁴⁷ Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), 'Equipment', JMSDF, mod.go.jp/msdf/en/equipment/.

⁴⁸ JMSDF, 'Budget Progress and Budget in Fundamental Reinforcement of Defense Capabilities: Overview of FY2025 Budget', JMSDF, p4, mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_budget/pdf/fy2025_20250411a.pdf.

⁴⁹ Department of Defence, 'Budget 2025–26', Department of Defence, defence.gov.au/about/accessing-information/budgets.

⁵⁰ Joseph Hammond, 'Japan Offers Enduring Support for Anti-Piracy Operations', Indo-Pacific Defence Forum, 20 June 2019, ipdefenseforum.com/2019/06/japan-offers-enduring-support-for-anti-piracy-operations/.

the NATO-led Operation OCEAN SHIELD and the US-led Exercise CUTLASS EXPRESS.⁵¹ Furthermore, the JMSDF has commanded CTF-151, conducted repeated port visits to Mombasa, Kenya, and Victoria, Seychelles, gifted 17 patrol boats to the Kenya Coast Guard Service and conducted goodwill exercises with the navies of several East African states under the Indo-Pacific Middle East Deployment 2025 framework.⁵² The establishment of Japan's first overseas military base in Djibouti, in 2011, has enabled the JMSDF to conduct sustained operations near critical choke points, such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and reinforced Japan's ability to project sea power in the region.⁵³ Japan's presence in the region signals an understanding that East Africa is integral to Indo-Pacific security. In contrast, despite Australia sharing similar characteristics, successive Australian governments continue to view the region as peripheral, disregarding the rising significance of and the risks posed to the SLOCs Australia depends upon.

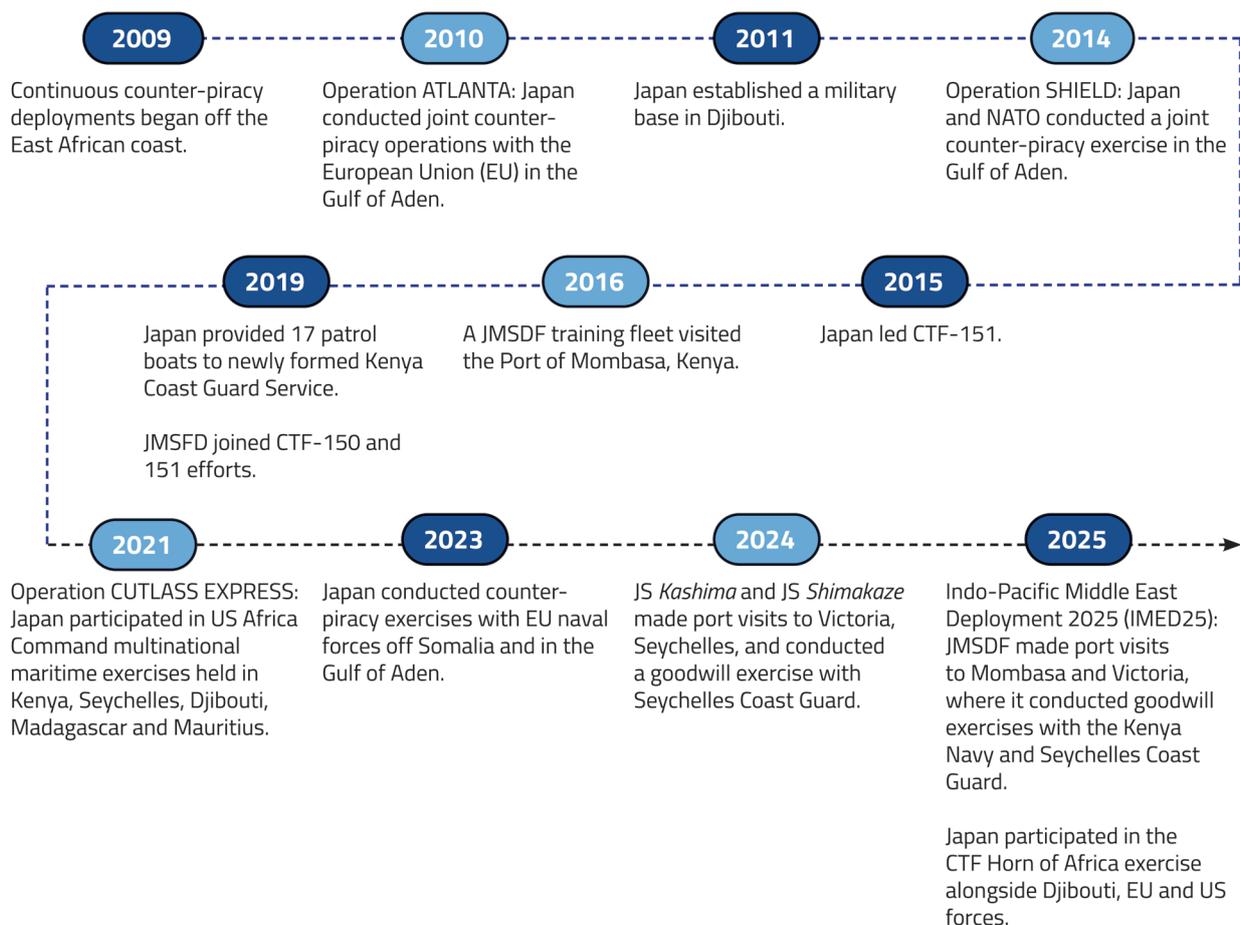


Figure 5. Japanese naval engagement with the East African coast since 2009.

⁵¹ The Mission of Japan to the European Union, 'Japan-EU Joint Naval Exercise', The Mission of Japan to the European Union, eu.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/11_000001_00024.html.

⁵² JMSDF, 'Japan-Seychelles Goodwill Exercise' [press release], JMSDF, 25 March 2025, mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202503/20250325en.pdf [PDF 1.2 MB].

⁵³ Samatar, 'Expanding the Indo-Pacific Region to East Africa'.

The Path Ahead for Australia's Engagement with the East African Coast

The East African coast is an area of growing economic and geopolitical importance. In 2021, two-way trade between Australia and African countries was valued at \$9.6 billion.⁵⁴ These economic activities depend on stable maritime access. A central function of the navy is to exercise sea power to secure prosperity. Australia needs to increase its naval engagement in the region to ensure the stability of SLOCs and protect its economic interests against growing maritime threats, including piracy and terrorism.⁵⁵ In the period since the Second World War, Australia has had a ten-year strategic warning time for conventional conflict.⁵⁶ However, the military modernisation of Indo-Pacific powers has eroded this warning period.⁵⁷ Regional powers now possess the ability to project military power across greater ranges, including against Australia's trade routes.⁵⁸ Consequently, Australia must reassess its ambivalence towards its western security frontier.⁵⁹ This section has outlined several reasons for the Australian Government to task the RAN to follow the actions of other Indian Ocean actors by expanding its naval presence and establishing regional partnerships. Ultimately, strengthening RAN engagement in the region is no longer optional—it is a strategic necessity.⁶⁰

Wade Deeper: Opportunities Arising from Increased Naval Engagement

The East African coast presents significant opportunities for Australia to assert influence and protect its interests, should it recalibrate its strategic posture and increase maritime engagement in the region. The contemporary return to great power politics has resulted in renewed geopolitical competition and the re-establishment of spheres of influence.⁶¹ This is exemplified in Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁶² Major powers, such as China, Russia and the US, are reasserting influence through amplified military presence, infrastructure development and economic coercion. As the international system increasingly resembles a multipolar sphere of influence order, African countries remain largely outside any single power's exclusive control, making the continent a contested yet open forum for influence. Due to its strategic location along key maritime corridors

⁵⁴ DFAT, 'Africa Region Brief', dfat.gov.au/geo/africa-middle-east/africa-region-brief.

⁵⁵ Parker, 'Australia Needs to Step Up in the Western Indian Ocean'.

⁵⁶ Department of Defence, 'National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023', p24.

⁵⁷ Department of Defence, 'National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023', p24.

⁵⁸ Department of Defence, 'National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023', p25.

⁵⁹ Richard Marles, Launch of the National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program [speech transcript], Department of Defence, 17 April 2024, minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2024-04-17/launch-national-defence-strategy-integrated-investment-program.

⁶⁰ Hicks & Yeophantong, 'Why Africa Matters to Australia'.

⁶¹ Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast, 'Introduction: The Return of Spheres of Influence?', *Geopolitics*, vol 23(2), 2018, p278, doi: 10.1080/14650045.2018.1461335.

⁶² Monica Duffy Toft, 'The Return of Spheres of Influence: Will Negotiations Over Ukraine Be a New Yalta Conference That Carves Up the World?', *Foreign Affairs*, 13 March 2025, foreignaffairs.com/united-states/return-spheres-influence?check_logged_in=1&utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=article_link&utm_term=article_email&utm_content=20250517.

and its abundance of resources, East Africa is becoming a zone of competition between China, Japan, India and the US.

The East African coast offers a natural entry point for Australia to expand its influence in a region set to rise in geopolitical importance. By expanding its naval engagement, Australia could demonstrate an enduring commitment to sustaining a strategic presence in the East African coast, resist strategic marginalisation and credibly project its power to shape the region to align with its interests. An enhanced RAN presence will also naturally lead to economic collaboration, as naval engagement generates strong strategic relationships and recurring opportunities for diplomatic engagement. These relationships foster familiarity, trust and open dialogue between parties, establishing the secure conditions necessary to enable commercial partnerships, investment and trade.

Establishing such relationships and conditions is highly relevant at a time when East Africa's rapid population growth, economic development and copious natural resources present opportunities for economic growth. In 2025, the population of East Africa is approximately 500 million.⁶³ The population is projected to increase to approximately 840 million by 2050.⁶⁴ This demographic shift has implications for future labour markets and consumer demand, with a young population driving economic growth. By engaging early with this emerging market, Australia can secure a strategic economic footing before international competition intensifies. Additionally, East Africa is rich in critical minerals, including copper, cobalt, graphite, nickel and iron.⁶⁵ These resources are essential for the production of clean energy and technology. As demand for these materials grows, states will turn to East Africa to meet their resource requirements, transforming the region into a global supply chain. This presents a profitable opportunity for Australia's mining industries.

In 2019, there were over 170 Australian Securities Exchange-listed firms operating in 35 African countries.⁶⁶ Many of these Australian companies are involved with the East African resource sector, such as Black Rock Mining Limited, which secured \$40 million in financing for its 2024 graphite project in Tanzania.⁶⁷ In 2024, Australia's investment in Africa's mining sector was estimated at between \$40 billion and \$60 billion.⁶⁸ Increased naval engagement is necessary to secure the SLOCs that enable this increasingly valuable trade, and to ensure that these investments remain secure and that companies have the opportunity to expand. The presence of the RAN would enable the protection of SLOCs to safely transport these minerals, reassure Australian investors that their goods are protected and increase diplomatic ties with

⁶³ World Population Review, 'Eastern Africa: Population', World Population Review, worldpopulationreview.com/continents/eastern-africa.

⁶⁴ Shamit Saggat, Christopher Lin, Miriam Fisher and Rebecca Rey (eds), *Indian Ocean Futures: Prospects for Shared Regional Success*, UWA Public Policy Institute, 2023, p48, doi: 10.26182/48ak-2y68.

⁶⁵ Baruah, Labh and Greely, *Mapping the Indian Ocean Region*, p22.

⁶⁶ Hicks and Yeophantong, 'Why Africa Matters to Australia'.

⁶⁷ African Mining Week 2025, 'CMA to Unpack Australia's Growing Role in African Mining', African Mining Week 2025, 19 September 2024, african-miningweek.com/news/cma-unpack-australias-growing-role-african-mining?utm.

⁶⁸ Kate O'Shaughnessy, 'Australia Needs to Boost Its Engagement with Africa, but Not for the Reasons Advocates Say We Should', Lowy Institute, 3 September 2024, lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/australia-needs-boost-its-engagement-africa-not-reasons-advocates-say-we-should.

East African coastal states, encouraging Australian firms to conduct business in the region. Increasing engagement with East Africa in these ways will enable Australia to safeguard its economic interests and unlock new opportunities for trade, investment and strategic influence.

No Presence, No Power: Threats Associated with Limited Naval Engagement

The East African coast faces a number of ongoing security threats, including maritime piracy, terrorism, insurgencies by Islamic extremist groups, illegal fishing and trafficking. The RAN's deprioritisation of the region ensures that these problems are not distant but instead directly threaten Australia's maritime trade and national security.

One significant threat to Australia is the disruption to its fuel supply chain. According to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Australia currently holds approximately 24 days of diesel, 20 days of jet fuel and 28 days of petrol in reserve.⁶⁹ This is in breach of the International Energy Agency's mandated stockholding obligation, which requires members to hold oil stocks equivalent to 90 days of net imports.⁷⁰ Depletion of fuel is one of the most prevalent issues facing the Australian Defence Force.⁷¹ It poses a substantial threat to Australia's national security, as modern military forces are dependent on fuel to operate. Without sufficient fuel reserves, sustained military operations are unfeasible. With limited domestic production capacity, Australia is reliant on imports of crude and refined fuel.⁷² In 2020–21, Australia imported 91 per cent of its petroleum.⁷³ Petroleum was imported from over 20 countries, with 13 per cent derived from the Middle East, 21 per cent from Africa and 58 per cent from the Asia-Pacific.⁷⁴

Australia's two biggest suppliers of refined petroleum are Singapore and South Korea.⁷⁵ Singapore imports over two-thirds of its crude oil from the Middle East, specifically

⁶⁹ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), 'Australian Petroleum Statistics', DCCEEW, 2025, energy.gov.au/energy-data/australian-petroleum-statistics.

⁷⁰ Carter, Quicke and Armistead, 'Over a Barrel', p4.

⁷¹ Martin White, 'The Compelling Requirement to Energy-Proof the Australian Defence Force', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no. 175, 2008, p12, search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.981960140856354.

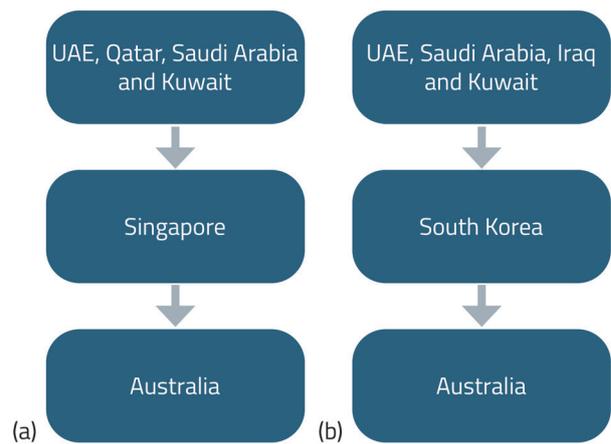
⁷² Josh Taylor, 'More than 90% of Australia's Fuel Imported—Leaving Country Vulnerable to Shortages, Report Says', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2022, theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/21/over-90-of-australias-fuel-imported-leaving-country-vulnerable-to-shortages-report-says.

⁷³ Carter, Quicke and Armistead, 'Over a Barrel', p4.

⁷⁴ Australian Institute of Petroleum (AIP), 'Facts About the Australian Transport Fuels Market', AIP, aip.com.au/sites/default/files/download-files/2017-09/Facts%20about%20the%20Australian%20Transport%20Fuels%20Market_2015_1.pdf [PDF 509 KB].

⁷⁵ L.E.K. Consulting, *Fuel–Supply Chain Benchmarking Report: Report for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications*, L.E.K. Consulting, 2021, p4, freightaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/commodity-report--fuel.pdf [PDF 4.6 MB].

the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Figure 6a).⁷⁶ To reach Singapore, these inbound shipments must transit through choke points surrounding the East African coast, including the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden and the Mozambique Channel. Similarly, South Korea imports 60 per cent of its crude oil from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE (Figure 6b)⁷⁷, and its oil imports travel through the same choke points. As depicted in Figure 7 these SLOCs are characterised by insecurity and experience maritime violence from piracy. Between 2010 and 2019, over 625 piracy incidents were recorded on the East African coast.⁷⁸ Additionally, since 2023, the Houthi rebel movement has attacked commercial vessels using technology including drones and Iranian missiles.⁷⁹ These incidents of maritime violence disrupt the safe passage of oil, increasing shipping costs, delaying deliveries and potentially preventing access to essential supplies. Although Australia imports only a small portion of its oil from the Middle East, its refined fuel imports from South Korea and Singapore are dependent on Middle Eastern supplies. Any disruption in these choke points compromises Australia's fuel security. The RAN's sparse engagement on the East African coast leaves Australia unable to deter or respond to piracy, exposing its fuel supply chain to this maritime threat. Additionally, the socioeconomic impacts of rapid population growth, unsupported by state structures around education and employment, may exacerbate this threat in the future. In summary, RAN engagement in the East African coast is imperative to protecting Australia's fuel imports.



Figures 6a & b. (a) Australia's imported fuel supply chain via Singapore; (b) Australia's imported fuel supply chain via South Korea.



Figure 7. Maritime threats to SLOCs. Source: Adapted from d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=34030&lang=en.

⁷⁶ US Energy Information Administration (EIA), 'Singapore: Analysis', EIA, August 2021, eia.gov/international/analysis/country/SGP.

⁷⁷ EIA, 'South Korea: Analysis', EIA, 13 April 2023, eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR.

⁷⁸ Hanwen Fan, Zheng Chang, Haiying Jia, Xuzhuo He and Jing Lyu, 'How Do Navy Escorts Influence Piracy Risk in East Africa? A Bayesian Network Approach', *Risk Analysis*, vol 44(9), 2024, p2025, doi: 10.1111/risa.14289.

⁷⁹ Mostafa Ahmed, 'Straits on Edge: How Straits Threaten the Future of the MENA Region', *Futurescapes*, no. 2, 2024, p27, habtoorresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Futurescapes-Issue-2-MENA-at-a-Crossroads-Unveiling-Looming-Risks.pdf.

Australia's lack of sustained focus on the East African coast also leaves a vacuum that is being occupied by China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a China-led global investment and infrastructure strategy. As part of the BRI, China has constructed ports, transport infrastructure, power grids and energy pipelines in East African nations, extending its economic, military and political reach in the region.⁸⁰ This is exemplified by the establishment of a Chinese base in Djibouti, in 2017, which provides China with a permanent military foothold on the East African coast.⁸¹ China's sponsorship of many regional projects has ensured that it has become a preferred partner for many East African governments.

In juxtaposition, the RAN's lack of engagement can be interpreted by regional powers as symptomatic of the Australian Government's broader lack of interest in the East African coast.⁸² Consequently, Australia appears as a disinterested and unreliable partner.⁸³ China's growing role poses several risks for Australia, including challenging the concept of an inclusive, free and open Indo-Pacific, weakening rules-based multilateral institutions and undermining democratic values.⁸⁴ China is Africa's largest trading partner and leading source of funding for infrastructure. However, critics warn that rising debt burdens in East African states, such as Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, risk generating vulnerabilities and constraining sovereignty.⁸⁵ Ultimately, as China's role expands across East Africa, Australia's strategic leverage will be further reduced, preventing it from asserting influence or contributing to the shaping of the regional maritime environment.

Charting New Currents: Recommendations for Increased RAN Engagement

In light of the findings of this paper, it is apparent that Australia must increase its maritime engagement with the East African coast to mitigate threats and take advantage of the opportunities yielded by an amplified presence in the region. The following recommendations suggest feasible measures that align with Australia's ambitions, defence posture and maritime capacity.

⁸⁰ Edward Lynch, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa: Finding Success in Failure?', *Military Review*, vol 110, 2023, pp113–114, armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2023/Chinas-Belt/.

⁸¹ Alex Vines, Armida Van Rij and Henry Tugendhat, 'Is China Eyeing a Second Military Base in Africa as the US Struggles to Maintain One in Niger?', Chatham House, 24 March 2024, [chathamhouse.org/2024/03/china-eyeing-second-military-base-africa-us-struggles-maintain-one-niger](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/china-eyeing-second-military-base-africa-us-struggles-maintain-one-niger).

⁸² Samuel Bashfield, 'Halfway, Right: Australia's Approach to the Indian Ocean', Australia India Institute, 17 June 2024, [aii.unimelb.edu.au/halfway-right-australias-approach-to-the-indian-ocean/](https://www.aii.unimelb.edu.au/halfway-right-australias-approach-to-the-indian-ocean/).

⁸³ Michael Sheldrick, 'Australia Wants to Reinvigorate Ties with Africa', Australian Institute of International Affairs, 23 December 2022, [internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australia-wants-to-reinvigorate-ties-with-africa/](https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australia-wants-to-reinvigorate-ties-with-africa/).

⁸⁴ Edward Lynch, 'China' Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa: Finding Success in Failure?', p114.

⁸⁵ Noah Cheruiyot Mutai, Nguyen Manh Cuong, Valdrin Dervishaj, Joyce Wangui Kiarie, Peter Misango, Lawrence Ibeh, Olufunke Mercy Popoola and Muniruddeen Lallmahamood, 'Examining the Sustainability of African Debt Owed to China in the Context of Debt-Trap Diplomacy', *Scientific African*, vol 24, June 2024, p1, doi: 10.1016/j.sciaf.2024.e02164.

1. Recommendation One: The Australian Government must formally acknowledge that East Africa is a critical region in its strategic environment. Policymakers must avoid viewing East Africa through a lens of afro-pessimism. Instead, policymakers should regard East African countries as important regional partners and implement an Indian Ocean maritime strategy that fills the current policy gap, explicitly incorporates East Africa and establishes a framework to ensure long-term engagement.
2. Recommendation Two: To address the constraints that the RAN's limited resources place on its maritime presence in distant theatres, Australia needs to expand its surface level fleet, such as frigates. This will enable the RAN to operate in the East African region for extended periods, protect its interests, respond to crises and maintain high levels of maritime awareness.
3. Recommendation Three: Australia needs to maintain semi-regular maritime deployments to signal its ongoing interest in, and commitment to, the region. This builds trust with regional actors and ensures operational familiarity, enabling an effective response in crisis situations.
4. Recommendation Four: The RAN should strengthen bilateral defence cooperation with East African coastal states through joint training exercises and capacity building programs. These programs could help foster long-term relationships and enhance Australia's reputation as a responsible Indo-Pacific power.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Australia's engagement with the East African coast is minimal. Regardless of the region's increasing geopolitical importance, economic potential and location next to vital SLOCs, Australia remains insufficiently engaged. The RAN's absence from the region is both an oversight in policy and a missed strategic opportunity. While the Pacific Ocean remains Australia's core theatre of engagement, expansion of the RAN's surface level fleet would allow Australia to maintain a credible presence across multiple domains, including in the Indian Ocean. Increased RAN presence in this region will provide Australia with the opportunity to assert its influence in an area that is still open to international partnerships, expand its trade and investment connections with emerging African powerhouses, and strengthen its reputation as a reliable security partner in the Indo-Pacific.

Conversely, inaction has the potential to result in the strategic marginalisation of Australia. The risks associated with Australian disengagement are escalating as China consolidates its presence in East Africa through port infrastructure and investment, reshaping regional norms in ways that divert from Australia's interests. Furthermore, disengagement leaves critical SLOCs, including those utilised in Australia's fuel supply chain, exposed to threats such as piracy. Recognition of East Africa as an essential locality in the Indo-Pacific has the potential to offer numerous benefits for Australia, both in terms of international relations and maritime policy. By implementing the recommendations provided in this paper, Australia can begin laying the foundations for a new Indian Ocean strategy that bolsters its national interests.

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