



An Australian vision of the Indo-Pacific – Through a Strategic and Maritime Lens

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*“...Australia looks to the world in two directions, on one side lies the Indian Ocean and the developing monsoon lands of Asia. On the other side lies the Pacific and the affluent new world. Australia does not have to choose between these two worlds. It can act as a bridge between them...”*¹

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi,
Canberra, May 22, 1968

Introduction

The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a single region of interest is specifically useful for Australia, because it encompasses all of Australia’s maritime surrounds. To the east, Australia has a long-held interest in the Southwest Pacific, including significant aid and development work. To the north, in Southeast Asia, through which the bulk of Australia’s exports are transported, the rules – based order and stability of this region are vital. To the west, Australia’s interest in India and the Indian Ocean is intense and growing, reflecting the growth in activity along the nation’s long western shore.

The late American geostrategist Nicholas Spykman provides one succinct account of the geographical intimacy Australia has with this Asiatic Mediterranean. Spykman contends that this middle sea bounded by Asia to the north and Australia in the south is bountiful in produce, rich in trading and an area dominated by a contest of the greatest Asian naval power [Japan] and the western nations of Europe and the United States. Spykman also argues that Australia does not exist in terms of its own strength, but as part of a superior naval power [the United Kingdom] underpinned by the isolation of its geographic location.² This observation arguably captures the historical Australia and regional geopolitical view of each other.

¹ The Hindu Times, ‘Indira Gandhi’s talks in Canberra’, accessed on 23 May 2018 <http://www.thehindu.com/archives/indira-gandhis-talks-in-canberra/article23962268.ece>

² N. J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 130 - 133



Significantly, it reinforces the enormity of Australia's maritime domain. Two things have changed since 1943, China is now an Asian power and Australia's predominant security relationship is with another superior naval power, the United States.

The aim of this essay is to overview the strategic narrative of the Indo – Pacific through the maritime and strategic lens. It sets the stage through a brief review of the Australian geopolitical narrative of the Indo-Pacific, review Australia's new Pacific *Step Up* policy and lastly, Australia's recapitalisation of its Navy, arguably the most significant strategic maritime statement Australia has made since WWII.

Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Australia has recently re-energised its geopolitical narrative. Whilst the term Asia-Pacific has underpinned the strategic and economic lexicon for some time, the term Indo-Pacific has emerged from a geographical footnote to become a geopolitical reference point.³ A recent Australian Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Griggs explained that the term Indo-Pacific is useful because it places emphasis on two vital oceans: the Pacific and the Indian whose interconnectedness the nations of the Indo-Pacific rely on for their maritime trade and prosperity.⁴

Australian commentator Rory Medcalf presents a broadly accepted definition of the Indo Pacific: '*...recognising that the accelerating economic and security connections between the Western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean region are creating a single strategic system*'⁵ This language demonstrates an awareness of the rise of China and India and the expansion of their economic, strategic and diplomatic objectives, their maritime concerns and ambition and the enduring strategic presence of the United States, particularly the United States Seventh Fleet based in Japan.

³ David Scott, "Australia's embrace of the Indo-Pacific: new term, new region, new strategy?," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 13, (2013): 427 and Brendan Taylor, "The Defence White Paper 2013 and Australia's Strategic Environment," *Security Challenges* Vol 9, No 2, (2013): 17

⁴ VADM R. Griggs, "*Girt by Beach, does our National Outlook allow us to meet the geo-security challenges of the Indo-Pacific*," (Speech: Canberra: February 14, 2014) and VADM R. Griggs, "*Maritime Confidence Building Measures in the Indo-Pacific*," (Speech: Sydney: August 12, 2013)

⁵ Rory Medcalf, "In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's new strategic map," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68: 4 (14 May 2014): 471-472.



Whilst the rationale by Medcalf states that the term has distinct merits, it is an objective description of Australia's two-ocean geography which recognises the rise of China and Australia's reliance on energy imports across the Indian Ocean by other regional states like Japan and India. Moreover, given Australia's burden of seaborne commerce with these nations, Medcalf contends that no other term fits strategically so succinctly. Lastly, Medcalf argues that the term Indo-Pacific helps to merge Australia into the region rather than remaining on the periphery.⁶

But not all are convinced of the utility of this relationship. Traditionally, Australia's strategic environment has been synonymous with the Asia-Pacific region. Recently, the term Indo-Pacific has come under scrutiny and precisely what the Indo-Pacific means remains subject to debate. Andrew Phillips has effectively recommended the deletion of a hyphen and instead a dash placed between 'Indo and Pacific' because he argues important strategic differences exist between the two oceans: the Pacific and the Indian.⁷

Briefly, Phillips considers Australian strategic geography as being revolutionised. Australia has embraced the Asia-Pacific concept of the region since the 1970s, but Phillips asserts that commentators and policymakers are increasingly using the term Indo-Pacific. He contends this enables multiple and contradictory interpretations; the idea is not dissimilar to a Rorschach inkblot. This could lead to a confused grand strategy and undermines the regional engagement as a result.⁸

Whilst there is no denying that Australia is amidst a geopolitical redux, some see the Indo-Pacific as a coherent strategic system that already exists, whereas others use the term Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific interchangeably and see no problem with doing so.⁹ Other arguments suggest that Australia should not confine itself to regional conceptions of its strategic environment and that it needs to take a much broader, globalist view. The repeated

⁶ Medcalf," In Defence of the Indo-Pacific, 472

⁷ Rod Lyon," The Indo-Pacific and the nature of conjoinment," *The Strategist*, October 20, 2016. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-nature-conjoinment/print/>

⁸ Andrew Phillips, *From Bollywood to Hollywood? Recasting Australia's Indo/Pacific Strategic Geography*, (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 2016), 4-7 and Phillips, Andrew, "From Bollywood to Hollywood? Australia's Indo/Pacific future in a contested Asia", *The Strategist*, (October, 12, 2016) <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hollywood-bollywood-australias-indopacific-future-contested-asia/print/>

⁹ Nick Bisley, *Integrated Asia: Australia's Dangerous New Strategic Geography*, (Canberra: Australian National University, May 2017), 7



references to the ‘global rules-based order’ in the 2016 Defence white paper arguably support this view.¹⁰ However, the challenges to the existing regional order, China’s increasingly assertiveness in the South China Sea, vocal regionalism in the South Pacific and growing competitiveness in the Indian Ocean region provides an broad aperture in which Australia must focus appropriately across the Indo-Pacific, this predominately maritime domain which has always been Australia’s principal region of strategic interest.

Australia’s New Pacific Chapter

While the Indo-Pacific embraces both Australia’s principle seaboard, the most recent maritime policy initiative is focused on the Pacific Ocean. In November 2018, Prime Minister Morrison spoke to the Army’s 3 brigade in Townsville and stated that Australia’s national security and the security of the Pacific are intertwined, and that the Pacific region was a foreign policy priority.¹¹ The Prime Minister stated that Australia was the largest aid donor to the region and that our interest is founded on the basis of ensuring that the Pacific region a strategically secure, economically stable with sovereign integrity assured for all states. However, Australia’s influence was not guaranteed, and the Pacific ‘step-up’ policy was designed to reinforce Australia desire to be the principal security partner for the region which would include several initiatives ranging from infrastructure, training, cooperation and capability enhancement.¹²

First, the Pacific Maritime Security Programme will include new patrol boats with increased capability, aerial surveillance and greater information sharing. Second, Australia is contributing to the infrastructure redevelopment of the Blackrock Peacekeeping Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief Camp in Fiji which will support the training of police, peacekeepers and deploying troops.¹³ Third, Australia and the Solomon Island have signed a bilateral security agreement and Australia and Vanuatu are negotiating a similar security arrangement. Fourth, Australia will cooperate with the government of Papua New Guinea and develop the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island which will increase the interoperability

¹⁰ Bisley, *Integrated Asia: Australia’s Dangerous New Strategic Geography* and Marise Payne, *Defence White Paper 2016* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia: 2016) This Defence White Paper used the term *rules-based order* 56 times

¹¹ Julie Bishop, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), 99 – 104 and S. Morrison, “Prime Minister’s Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapters,” (Speech: Townsville: November 18, 2018).

¹² Bishop, *Foreign Policy White Paper*, 100

¹³ Morrison, *A New Chapter*.

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between both defence forces. This maritime interoperability will be enhanced by more Australian naval developments to undertake maritime training exercises to take advantage of the new *Guardian Class* patrol boats.¹⁴

Australia – Recapitalising a Navy

Australia's sharpening maritime focus can be seen in its declared maritime strategic approach to defence policy. A major element of this is a national enterprise approach to the way the majority of the Royal Australian Navy's warships will be acquired. Using what is often referred to as a policy of continuous shipbuilding, the Royal Australian Navy will be recapitalised.

Continuous shipbuilding is a shorthand description for a sophisticated approach to the ongoing design and construction of the submarines, surface combatants and patrol vessels Australia needs. Not only will it recapitalise Australia's navy, it will keep it up to date. By building in batches a balance can be struck between the efficiency of building a known design with the ability to introduce new technology. As the Australian ship building enterprise matures, it will enable the Australian Government to make rapid choices about the size and capability of its maritime forces in response to changes in the Indo-Pacific's strategic circumstances. It will also enable Australia to offer another major element of partnership, through the export of systems or even entire vessels.

In larger nations than Australia, the idea of continuous shipbuilding would probably not be considered in any detail as there is no other approach which so efficiently combines a nation's strategic, military, industrial and technology needs. Similarly, for smaller nations, the idea would receive little attention as it would likely be beyond the nation's capacity. Australia, because of its need for maritime power and by virtue of its economic capacity, sits at an inflexion point where continuous ship building must be a conscious choice and the merits and costs will be closely examined (Canada is another example). As a result, continuous ship building will be a topic of enduring discussion in Australia as the capability is incorporated into the national military discussion, understanding and decision making.

¹⁴ Morrison, *A New Chapter*.

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While there is considerable attention on the design and construction phase of a warship's service life, the maintenance and sustainment phase and the supply chains that support all phases can sometimes receive less attention. These activities are major activities in their own right and underpin the military utility initially delivered. They also demonstrate the need to approach continuous shipbuilding with an understanding of maritime forces as systems; while this can be difficult, it allows for the system to be adapted to best suit the prevailing environment or a nation's specific circumstances. Every nation has its own specific needs (one example for Australia is the large, almost hemispheric distances that are routinely covered) and the systems approach allows them to be met in the most efficient way.

Conclusion

For much of its recent history, Australia has often been defined simply in terms of its relationship with the United Kingdom and more recently the United States. While those relationships are strong and enduring, they do not define Australia. The contemporary focus on the Indo-Pacific and maritime Southeast Asia and the emphasis on partnerships, cooperation and the rules-based global order are indicative of a distinct Australian contribution to the broader strategic conversation. The commitment to continuous ship building in Australia demonstrates that providing the platform for industry, education and science and small business to work together can deliver national security and prosperity. For a maritime nation, this clear view of the horizon will enable Australia to pursue its ambitions in this new era.