



In Search of an Australian Maritime School of Thought



© Copyright Commonwealth of Australia 2023

This work is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, and with the standard source credit included, no part may be reproduced without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the Director, Sea Power Centre - Australia.

The views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Australian Government, the Department of Defence and the Royal Australian Navy. The Commonwealth of Australia will not be legally responsible in contract, tort or otherwise for any statement made in this publication.

The Sea Power Centre - Australia was established to undertake activities to promote the study, discussion and awareness of maritime issues and strategy within the Royal Australian Navy. Our mission is:

- to promote understanding of sea power and its application to the security of Australia's national interests
- to contribute to regional engagement and the development of maritime strategic concepts
- to facilitate informed discussion on matters of maritime security and strategic affairs

Enquiries related to the activities of the Centre should be directed to:
seapower.centre@defence.gov.au

Cover image

HMAS Hobart sails past HMAS Sydney in preparation for Exercise Tasman Shield 2023.

In Search of an Australian Maritime School of Thought

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide

Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied

- John Masefield

It is no more difficult today than millennia ago to have distinct approaches to the use of force and the construction of military forces. Small powers have always had unique ways of waging war. When seeking a description of a uniquely Australian way of war, only one word appears apt – expeditionary.

This refers to the policy of successive Australian governments since federation to dispatch land forces to various theatres around the world to support allied operations – in Africa, Western Europe, North Africa, Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East.

However, during the Pacific War, when Australian forces fought alone for months awaiting reinforcement from the United States and in subsequent operations that the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) undertook, its service people felt sidelined by American leadership. Meanwhile, American troops prosecuted the bloodiest battles advancing on the Japanese home islands.¹ This is, of course, in no way to diminish the courage of Australian troops in Bougainville, New Guinea, or Borneo. It does, however, point towards a trend that had started from white settlement, and continued after Prime Minister Curtin looked to America in 1941, of Australian governments committing forces largely as elements supporting the strategy of the country's security guarantor of the day. Australia felt the need to ensure that it was not left alone in what its predominantly Anglo-Celtic founders saw as a far-flung corner of the world.²

This strategy has certainly been beneficial for Australian security and prosperity. Seeking the protection of a "great and powerful friend" has assuaged concerns about invasion, and allowed the country to divert money that might have been spent on defence to domestic

¹ Walker, Frank, "Diggers 'afraid to attack enemy'", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 2007. This was a criticism of Max Hasting's book *Nemesis*, wherein he alleged that Australian troops were too afraid by the end of the war to attack Japanese forces, and were relegated to mopping up operations.

² Gyngell, Allan, *Fear of Abandonment* (Melbourne, 2017), 5.

programs – healthcare, education, and the social safety net.³ This paper does not intend to argue the political merits of this approach. Instead, it will examine its intellectual implications.

From decades before the first Australians were sent overseas to fight in an allied operation during the Mahdist War in Sudan in 1885, the only military operations instigated by Australians were either stabilisation operations or wars of colonial dispossession. Stabilisation operations were often at the request of a host country and with the agreement of the international community – as with INTERFET – the need for which itself was created by a failure of Canberra’s preferred strategy in relation to East Timorese independence⁴. Wars of colonial dispossession included conflicts that raged for well over a century after 1788. I do not intend to draw a causal link between the former conflicts and the modern ADF. However, there is one element that binds all these engagements together, and is an intriguing factor when considering the intellectual development of Australian strategy over the last two centuries: they were dominated by the army, not the navy.

Prior to Federation, Australia’s six colonies maintained their own separate fleets for home defence. In 1901, these were amalgamated to form the Commonwealth Naval Forces, and then in 1911, when Australia’s first destroyers were commissioned, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was founded.

Under Admiralty control during the First World War,⁵ the RAN did not conduct the kinds of operations that secured the Army its monopoly over the ANZAC legend that took root after the war – Gallipoli, Villiers-Bretonneux, Hamel, Beersheba. As a result, in the popular imagination that forms the basis for acceptable political decisions in a democratic state, the RAN received far less scrutiny than the Army. It is only in recent years, with the realisation both of a strategic competition between China and the US in the Pacific Ocean and of the immense costs involved in acquiring naval platforms, that the country has begun to approach something like a realisation of the importance of naval power.

However, contemporary conversations about the RAN centre around monetary costs and shipbuilding times. There are few discussions of exactly what effect a powerful Australian

³ Evans, Michael, *Land Warfare Studies Centre Study Paper No. 306, The Tyranny of Dissonance: Australia’s Strategic Culture and Way of War, 1901-2005* (Canberra 2005), 20.

⁴ Stockings, Craig, *Born of Fire and Ash: Australian operations in response to the East Timor Crisis, 1999-2000, Volume 1: Official History of Australian Peacekeeping Operations in East Timor* (Sydney, 2022), 820.

⁵ Horner, David, *The War Game* (Sydney, 2022), 21.

navy is meant to deliver, and fewer still about how it fits into an overriding strategy. As an island nation, living in an Asian century that from Canberra's perspective is almost by its very definition a maritime one, a robust maritime strategy is crucial for Australia's future security and prosperity. But for an island nation, we have historically lacked both a maritime outlook and an Australian approach to the employment of naval forces.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore why Australian naval power has not received the intellectual attention that its land power has. To do so, it will examine the influence of the United Kingdom's Royal Navy (RN), and the United States Navy (USN) on the development of Australian naval thought, as well as how their own key theories of naval power have shaped the RAN today.

This paper aims to convey that Australian naval thought has not been able to develop as fully as that of our British or American cousins, that this need not have been the case. It argues strategists should devote far more consideration to the theoretical underpinnings of naval power, as well as its opportunities and limitations for Australia.

In an increasingly tense geopolitical environment, Australia must stop giving such short shrift to naval power. It must go beyond the attitude it has had until the present, exemplified by the flippant line in the national anthem that, "our home is girt by sea". The "greatest paradox"⁶ that an island continent lacks its own distinctive maritime school of thought ought to be resolved.

Australia's Security Legacy

At Federation, when the separate colonial navies were amalgamated into the Commonwealth Naval Forces, their structure, training, and ships were all inherited from the RN. Moreover, its first commander, Captain and later Rear Admiral Sir William Creswell, spent much of his early tenure in the position dedicated to organising the disparate fleets into something resembling a Navy.⁷ In the meantime, responsibility for Australia's naval maritime security was in the hand of RN ships of the Australia Station.

This station encompassed a vast amount of territory, stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans, and reaching Antarctica. It was one of many naval stations into which

⁶ Evans, "The Withheld Self", 1.

⁷ <https://navyhistory.org.au/australasian-naval-forces-and-commonwealth-naval-forces/>

Britain had divided the world - understanding how critical sea power was to both the emergence and maintenance of Empire.⁸

The RN had a place of particular importance in British life. From Drake's defeat of the Spanish Armada at Gravelines (1588) to Nelson's victory at Trafalgar (1805), it was British ships that had kept the isles safe and allowed for the unrestricted flow of trade, and of ground troops when necessary. In some ways, British naval power in the 19th century was analogous to that of Athens in the 5th century B.C. Athens had its Delian League, and Britain its Empire. Both would insist that their hegemonies were either not that, or beneficial to all involved – a hollow pronouncement as all empires throughout history, whether thalassocratic or continental, have existed for the benefit of an imperial centre. For Athens, the Delian League was the screen for its own imperialism, cast as a necessary grouping to resist attacks from the Persian Achaemenid Empire to the East.⁹ In Britain, particularly at the turn of the 20th century, an ideology of "liberal imperialism" was becoming more influential, with its proponents such as H.H. Asquith, Richard Burton Haldane, and Sir Edward Grey, arguing for imperial reform, and casting the imperial project as a fundamentally civilising mission, promoting prosperity around the world. This attitude is perhaps most effectively summarised in Kipling's infamous poem, "The White Man's Burden".

The depredations of Empire are well-documented elsewhere, and not strictly relevant to the argument at hand, but the relevance of the preceding paragraph is to show that, for the British as for the Athenians, sea power was a means of securing their own prosperity,¹⁰ and so it was important that all the elements involved in promoting sea power should, as much as possible, be in line with the imperial centre.

For Australia, as for many other navies who can trace their origins to the RN, in planning for its own navy it was cheaper and easier "to accept a British lead and the British line".¹¹ Indeed, the first major fleet unit that the then Commonwealth Naval Forces acquired – consisting of a battlecruiser (HMAS *Australia*), the light cruisers HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Melbourne*, the destroyers HMAS *Parramatta*, HMAS *Yarra*, and HMAS *Warrego*, and the submarines *AE1* and *AE2* – were provided by the British with the express strategic intent

⁸ Lambert, Adam, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (London, 2021), 224.

⁹ Motte, Martin, "Naval Strategy: Unity and Diversity", in *Étude marines*, 7 (2020) 11.

¹⁰ Momigliano, Arnaldo, "Sea Power in Greek Thought", *The Classical Review*, 58, 1 (1940), 2.

¹¹ Goldrick, "To Clone a Fighting Service: The Consequences of the Fleet Unit Concept", 2.

of imperial defence. As David Horner notes, these vessels “were designed for operations around the world rather than for the coastal defence of Australia alone”.¹²

This is not to say that such a decision was incorrect. For a country with a population of less at 5 million at the time, and a government and people who closely identified both their security interests and their sense of self with Britain. “The Empire’s business was Australia’s business”.¹³ Even before Federation, the separate Australian colonies had sent contingents to fight in South Africa during the Boer War (though they did little actual fighting).¹⁴

However, it is worth acknowledging the extent to which Australian defence planning was influenced if not totally directed by London, as it allows us to better draw a line between the “British line” and the way it affected the development – in terms of theory and of capability – of Australian naval power.

That British line was best exemplified by a theorist of naval power and national strategy whose influence is still rightly felt around the world to this day – Sir Julian Corbett.

Corbett’s Influence

Julian Corbett (1854-1922) was a British lawyer and naval historian, most famous today for his work *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911). This was just one of many intellectual contributions to the comprehension of naval power. He was an ally of Admiral John “Jacky” Fisher, and was a key figure in his reforms of the RN at the turn of the 20th century. It would take as many books again as have been written about Corbett to fully explore his theories. But it is necessary to have an overview of his arguments – not simply because they are considered and worth understanding, but because of their influence on the Royal Navy at time when the Australian Navy was in its infancy, they had a direct effect on how the CNF (and later the RAN).

At the core of Corbett’s theory of naval power is the idea of the “national life at sea”. Understandably for someone who lived at the centre of an empire that owed its existence and prosperity both to the sea and that the instruments by which it could exercise dominance in it, this “national life” was all-encompassing: economic, political, and social. This built on established ideas about sea power during Britain’s imperial age, exemplified

¹² *The War Game*, 18.

¹³ Reynolds, Henry, *Unnecessary Wars* (Sydney, 2016), 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 25.

well by this quote from Conservative politician and naval theorist: “the essential condition of the existence of the whole fabric of Empire, the pride and boast of all its citizens, is predominant sea power”.¹⁵

However, as opposed to another influential theorist whose ideas are explored below, Corbett did not explicitly link the preservation of this national life to permanent and decisive command of the sea.

For Corbett, the idea of sea command was too imprecise – too expansive and lacking the explanatory power to guide practical policy. Instead, according to Corbett “the loose phrase ‘command of the sea’ must be replaced by ‘control of passage and communications’. Officers should recognise that temporary or local control could secure strategic ends without battle.”¹⁶

“Command of the sea” does continue to be used in his works, but should be understood as referring to the above.

Thus, in 1911, Corbett would write that “the object of naval warfare must always be directly or indirectly to secure the command of the sea or to prevent the enemy from securing it.”¹⁷ This is a key idea to understand. While Corbett was employing language that is often used today – particularly when discussing anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) – he was doing so in a fundamentally practical manner. Command of the sea was not, for him, was not a *ding an sich*, but the *sine qua non* of naval strategy: it was not an end, but condition that allowed naval power to be useful in any meaningful sense. When he discusses denial, it is always in reference to the thing which is being denied: “the only safe method is to inquire what it is we can secure for ourselves, and what it is we can deny the enemy by command of the sea”.¹⁸ It was not necessary for Corbett to make hard boundaries between sea control and sea denial.

It is interesting, then, that in *Australian Maritime Operations* (AMO), published as a capstone to the RAN’s 2010 *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, a deliberate distinction is made between sea control and sea denial. The latter is generally reserved for smaller navies, where the

¹⁵ J. Colomb, “The Navy and the Colonies”, in *The Empire and the Century: A series of essays on imperial problems and possibilities by various writers* (London, 1905), 217.

¹⁶ Lambert, 162-3, with quotations from *Some Principles*.

¹⁷ *Some Principles*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 93.

former is the purview of major naval powers.¹⁹ However, Corbett would not agree. Where the AMO states that smaller navies “simply do not possess the range of capabilities needed to gain and assert sea control in a contested environment”, Corbett says that “permanent general control of the sea can only be secured by the practical annihilation of the enemy’s fleet by successful actions”. On the other hand, “local and temporary control” – that which can also enable either the conduct of other operations or otherwise alter the military balance of a conflict – can be achieved in many ways, including by containing, diverting, masking, or blockading an enemy force.²⁰ Moreover, Corbett makes clear that control of the sea equates to control of communication through the sea, “whether for commercial or military purposes”.²¹ This barely rates a mention in the AMO.²²

These opportunities to assert local and temporary control of the sea can be taken by relatively small powers. In 1919, the RN’s Admiral Jellicoe travelled to Australia and New Zealand to conduct reviews of their naval forces. He assessed that the only power that could threaten these parts of the British Empire was Imperial Japan. While he made clear that in the event of a general war with Japan a crucial element of the defence of Australia would be the Royal Navy, he also made the point that Australian forces themselves would need to be enhanced to the point that they could assert such local and temporary control in the Torres Strait. He proposed an increase in Australian naval and coastal forces including “six destroyers, 4 submarines, 4 patrol trawlers, and 12 mine-sweepers” to defend the Torres Strait.²³ This this was not a far-fetched idea – it was achievable, the most important thing that a strategy can be.

Indeed, practicality was at the centre of Corbett’s naval thought. He would argue that “if the object of naval warfare is to control communications, then the fundamental requirement is the means of exercising that control”.²⁴ Even if, therefore, a power were to have by virtue of its geography or lack of powerful neighbours, a de-facto control of the sea, this would be irrelevant without the platforms to operate within its bounds. Some might argue that the ability to deny control of the sea to others with land-based platforms

¹⁹ *Australian Maritime Operations*, 91.

²⁰ *Some Principles*, 339.

²¹ *Ibid*, 95.

²² Till, Geoffrey, *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century, revised and updated edition* (New York, 2018), 245.

²³ *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet, Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa, On Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August, 1919), Volume IV*, 245.

²⁴ *Some Principles*, 91.

is a theoretical escape here, but that avenue is a passive endeavour – control is active – and one that precludes the ability to take full advantage of command of the sea, including the ability to shape a country’s strategic environment.

A policy purely of sea denial may deter aggression, but it cannot actively shape a country’s circumstances, and limits its options to respond to unforeseen contingencies.

Following the Second World War, during which while under far more direct control than in the First, RAN ships were dispatched initially to support RN operations away from Australia, Australian naval thought changed. Britain remained an important ally and partner, but another figure had taken a pre-eminent position in Canberra’s strategic thinking – the United States of America. Its effect on the RAN would be profound. Indeed, it could be argued that this effect was a culmination of a process that began in 1908, when Alfred Deakin’s invitation to President Theodore Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet served as a ploy to convince the British admiralty to pay more attention to Australia’s independent naval requirements.²⁵

Australia’s shift away from the UK and towards to the US was, of course, part of a broader shift in the international system. The empire that was run from England was collapsing, as the costs of the Second World War and independence movements in its colonies made it increasingly impossible to maintain. In its wake, emerged a more informal empire, led by the United States. In this system, Australia continued to play the role it had when the British Empire was at its height – supporting the policies of an imperial centre that was once in London and had relocated to Washington DC.

This is relevant to discuss, since it had direct relevance to military matters. Before the First World War, Australia declined to purchase Canadian Ross rifles, noted for their great craftsmanship, in favour of British Lee-Enfields due to a decision to prioritise interoperability with the UK.²⁶ Much in the same way successive Australian Defence White Papers have noted that interoperability with the United States is “critical to Australia’s national security”.²⁷

²⁵ David Stephens, “The Great White Fleet’s 1908 visit to Australia”, *Sea Power Centre – Australia*, accessed at <https://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/great-white-fleet%E2%80%99s-1908-visit-australia>

²⁶ Fernandes, Clinton, *Subimperial Power: Australia in the International Arena* (Melbourne, 2022), 8.

²⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence Strategic Update* (2022), 26.

The 2016 Defence White Paper also highlights the importance of interoperability.

If naval platforms are hardware, then naval theory is software. When the US became Australia's primary security guarantor, its software changed, resulting in a fundamentally different maritime outlook to what it had had in the past. It is necessary to understand, then, the American perspective on naval power.

While there are many theorists who have contributed to US naval strategy in very important ways, it is fair to say that one name stands out: Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Mahan's Influence

Mahan (1840-1914) was an American naval officer and historian, who saw service in the American Civil War (1861-65) and later served on the Naval War Board during the Spanish-American War (1898). His theories of naval warfare and its importance for national power were deeply influential, with his most famous work being the 1890 work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*.

Before going any further in examining the influence that Mahan's work has exerted on the US Navy, and later by extension the RAN, it is necessary to state an important caveat. Mahan's importance is undeniable. In the Second World War, the US Secretary of the Navy, Henry Stimson, "famously wondered about 'the peculiar psychology of the Navy Department, which frequently seemed to retire from the realm of logic into a dim religious world in which Neptune was god, Mahan his prophet, and the U.S. Navy the only true church'".²⁸ However, Mahan's theories are hard to summarise. He penned around 5,000 pages of text during his writing career, and his style of writing is often overly complicated. Indeed, in Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*, people who insist on discussing Mahan's works are made into slightly boorish figures of fun.²⁹ The end result of all this is that Mahan, to use Geoffrey Till's words, "is very easy to misinterpret and oversimplify and has become the butt of much unjustified abuse".³⁰

With that said, it is equally true that even a misinterpreted theory can have as significant an effect on policy as a correctly interpreted one. Though, as all people do, Mahan's opinions changed over his life, it is possible to identify the elements of naval power that he considered most important, and to see how these elements have been received by the US Navy over time and informed its attitude towards the development and employment of

²⁸ James Lacey, "A Revolution at Sea: Old is New Again", *War on the Rocks*, 17th October 2019.

²⁹ *Seapower*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 76.

naval power. The following paragraphs will attempt to summaries the former, before discussing the latter.

Corbett was trying to make an existing maritime power more aware of the importance of its naval forces for its overriding national prosperity and security. Mahan, by contrast, was trying to convince a state whose prosperity and security had largely been built with land forces of the importance of naval forces.

It is crucial, too, to understand that even if at one point in time a series of naval capabilities are acquired to achieve a certain stated aim or set of aims, the acquisition of those capabilities may – through a variety of factors including overachieving, underachieving, or having positive unforeseen benefits – create a new aim or set of aims. As Ken Booth observed during the Cold War, “navies can beget new foreign policy requirements and responsibilities. They can also create new foreign policy intentions”.³¹ Because of the maritime domain’s disproportionate importance for national life more many countries compared to the air and land changes in the capabilities that allow a state to affect it, either absolute or relative, will be felt more keenly across that state than similar changes in land- or air-based capabilities.

In Vice Admiral (ret.) Tim Barrett’s monograph *The Navy and the Nation* (2017), he makes the important point that while sea control and sea denial can be useful concepts, “for some people they are terms that have become mere mantras—concepts around which people rally but which have come to mean whatever they want them to mean, very convenient but totally inconclusive”.³² However, through all his discussion of sea control and denial – and indeed through the whole work – Corbett is not mentioned once, with an overwhelming preference for Mahan.

While Mahan is certainly not without his merits, the preoccupation with his work over Corbett’s appears emblematic of the ways in which his style of thought – through US influence – is a highly influential one in the modern RAN. Much commentary around contemporary naval acquisition programs centre on the need to ensure the RAN is properly equipped for high-intensity conflict. This is, of course, correct, as all branches of a military should plan for such worst-case scenarios and ensure that they are up to the task. However, what a preoccupation purely with, for instance, the number of VLS cells a

³¹ Booth, Ken, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London, 1977), 97.

³² Barrett, Tim, *The Navy and the Nation, Australia’s Maritime Power in the 21st Century* (Melbourne, 2017).

surface platform has,³³ rather than the configuration of the fleet as a whole, speaks to a very American obsession with mass as a determinant of military power.

The US Naval Institute published a short article in 2023 entitled “Bigger fleets win”.³⁴ The article uses historical examples to argue that the US must drastically increase the size of its navy, and not just rely on a technological edge, in order to have a credible force with which to fight a putative maritime conflict with China. I do not intend to make a judgement on such a conflict here, as there are far too many variables to consider. However, what is worth noting in this article is its use of historical examples. The author asserts that only three wars out of 28 “with clashes of fleets or significant opposed naval operations” where the side with the smaller navy won. However, he does not consider any other elements in these wars that might have contributed to the victory of one side or the other.

The list of conflicts used is curious in many ways. Likening the various Anglo-Dutch wars to the Cold War is an interesting choice, as is asserting the Greco-Persian wars of antiquity were won by the side with the larger navy. Famously, the battle of Salamis is an example of a numerically inferior force defeating a superior one. The Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage, also feature in this list of conflicts – another curious choice given that the second war’s most decisive battles were on land – Lake Trasimene, Cannae, or Zama – but also that the first war hosted one of the largest naval battles in history, where according to Polybius, a smaller Roman force defeated a larger Carthaginian one at Cape Ecnomus (256 BC). It is easy to understand the argument for a larger US Navy, however arguments should always be rooted in fact. Trying to claim, for instance, that the decades-long Peloponnesian War was won purely because by its final years the Spartans had a larger navy than the Athenians is to draw faulty conclusions about a conflict that radically reshaped the internal political structures of its participants and caused them to make ill-advised strategic decisions. What should be gleaned from this short diversion is that what might win or lose a battle at sea might not necessary win or lose a war.

Interestingly, the obsession with pure numbers at sea should be seen as an aberration of Mahan’s thinking, who “stressed the overriding importance of location” rather than mass is producing naval power.³⁵ Additionally, the US can seriously think about having a navy

³³ Shackleton, David, “Rearming the Royal Australian Navy”, *The Strategist*, 26 February 2023
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/rearming-the-royal-australian-navy/>

³⁴ Tangredi, Sam, “Bigger fleets win”

³⁵ Kennedy, Paul, *Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II* (New Haven, 2022), 74.

large enough to win on numbers alone because of the sheer size of its industrial base. Australia cannot. Indeed, across all sectors, Australia's population limits its ability to build expand some industries without shrinking others.³⁶ Australia's geographic location should be seen as more of an asset to US military planners than the number of large surface ships the RAN can field. As VADM Barrett notes, "we both bring to the table important qualities and capabilities that enhance the strategic position of both parties. Nor should anyone underestimate the value deriving from differences between the capabilities of the RAN and the USN".³⁷

But as the RAN's force structure, particularly the planned acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS, resembles more and more that of the US Navy, is the value of these differences diminishing? Are we moving closer to a point where the only advantage an alliance with Australia presents to the United States is its location? These are important questions to answer.

If the 21st century is indeed the Asian century, then almost by definition it will be a maritime century. All of its key players are countries with vital interests at sea, in terms of trade, resources, and national security.

Australia is no exception. While in recent years there has been an acknowledgement of the signal importance of the maritime domain for Australia, with significant investments in new capability for the RAN, this has not been accompanied by the requisite intellectual investments. The RAN's history, its influence first from the Royal Navy and the ideas of Julian Corbett, and second from the US Navy and its interpretation of Alfred Thayer Mahan, have produced a peculiar phenomenon – a kind of activist complacency. Activist in that the RAN can and does conduct sustained operations that are vital for Australian security, but complacent in that it has never sought to develop its own distinctive approach to the maritime domain.

However, that the UK and US have such well-developed schools of maritime thought is not because their navies produced them alone. They are the products of a long-term national conversation, implicit or explicit, about the links between maritime power and national prosperity. Julian Corbett laid this link out in clear terms. Mahan sought to convince his continental nation that this link was vital.

³⁶ Edwards, John, *Beyond the Boom* (Penguin, 2014)

³⁷ Barrett, *The Navy and the Nation*.

Charitably, because of its historical isolation from major geopolitical crises, ties to the great powers of the era, and its geographic status as an island continent, the history of Australian strategy could be characterised by the absence of a need to develop its own distinctive strategic outlooks. Uncharitably, it could be described as a story in which the need to do so has been avoided or ignored.

Australians must go down to the seas again. For a country with an island continent to ourselves, in an era where the most likely physical domain in which great power conflict could occur is the maritime one, we must better understand how this domain features in our security. If not, our strategic imagination at sea will be idle as the proverbial ship upon its proverbial ocean. Australia's circumstances require that our naval thought have both breath and motion.

David Vallance is a Research Associate at the Lowy Institute, working with the Executive Director, Dr Michael Fullilove. Prior to joining the Institute in 2022, David worked as a consultant in Canberra, supporting projects within ADF Headquarters, Defence Science and Technology Group, the Royal Australian Navy, and the Department of Agriculture. He holds a Master of Strategic Studies from the ANU, a BA with First Class Honours in War Studies and History from King's College, London, and is an Associate of King's College.