SEMAPHORE

A FIRST ANALYSIS OF RAN OPERATIONS, 1990-2005

Over the past 15 years the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has experienced an increasing operational tempo as the strategic environment has changed, leading successive governments to commit forces to a operations around Australia, into the region and further afield. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has been at the forefront of these operations, as the recently published *Database of RAN Operations 1990-2005* illustrates.[1] While the information in the *Database* has been gathered from a variety of sources and is being continually refined and updated, an analysis of the existing data reveals some significant strategic issues.

Categories of operations in the *Database* are based on the *Span of Maritime Tasks* described in *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, a modification of Ken Booth's trinity of naval roles: military, constabulary and diplomatic.[2] Military operations are directly related to combat and the use, or threat, of force to achieve Australia's national interests. Constabulary operations - law and order or policing functions - are concerned with the enforcement of both domestic and international law, while Diplomatic operations include all the activities supporting national interests, including foreign relations and national foreign policy. Thus the role of any particular operation does not indicate the level of intensity of the threat environment. Importantly, it is the capabilities that enable the conduct of military operations that also permit constabulary and diplomatic operations to occur.

Table 1 provides a summary of the number and type of Australian maritime operations from January 1990 to March 2005.

	Types of Military Operations		
Year	Military	Constabulary	Diplomatic
1990	0	30	17
1991	1	15	10
1992	0	12	9
1993	0	8	8
1994	0	12	8
1995	0	13	9
1996	0	10	3
1997	0	22	12
1998	0	13	10
1999	1	14	6
2000	0	9	6
2001	1	15	7
2002	1	5	6
2003	2	25	12
2004	0	27	10
Jan-Mar 2005	0	2	5
Totals (376)	6	232	139

Table 1: RAN Maritime Operations 1990 – March 2005

Notwithstanding that the RAN mission is *to fight and win at sea*, numerically more constabulary and diplomatic operations have been conducted than military operations, although it is important to note that individual operations vary considerably in scope, size and duration. The ADF exists to defend Australia and Australian interests and when not committed to combat operations, it is a deterrent to potential adversaries. Where navies differ from armies or air forces is that a broad range of naval activities continually takes place, irrespective of whether forces are committed to combat operations.

Military operations are rare in number but have involved numerous, highly capable units for prolonged periods at lengthy distances from Australia. For example, the RAN has been committed to operations in the Persian Gulf since 1990, with some 30 deployments of individual ships or 2-3 ship Task Groups. This extensive commitment highlights the flexibility and durability of naval forces. When first deployed in 1990, the Australian Task Group was ready to sail within 48 hours of being committed, trained to a high readiness level while in transit and was ready to conduct operations on arrival in theatre. Subsequent deployments have involved a range of constabulary and coercive diplomatic roles when enforcing United Nations (UN) sanctions against Iraq, as well as direct combat during the 2003 Iraq War.

The other major national commitment during this period was the UN-mandated operation in East Timor from 1999. The RAN conducted a traditional amphibious operation, transporting and resupplying ADF and allied elements ashore. The RAN also undertook hydrographic surveys in Dili Harbour, cleared the harbour of obstacles and conducted explosive ordnance disposal, inserted troops along the East Timor coast, provided respite onboard its ships for shore-based forces, and, particularly in the initial stages, provided air defence to forces ashore.

Numerically, constabulary operations comprised the majority of operations since 1990, with the RAN providing a considerable and continuous contribution to Peacetime National Tasks (PNT).[3] The major focus of effort was the Civil Surveillance Program, with 1800 patrol boat sea days made available annually to Coastwatch for the surveillance, interception, boarding and repatriation of ships suspected of involvement in illegal fishing or illegal immigration. This commitment illustrates the RAN's long term utility in a whole of government approach to national security. In other anti-illegal fishing operations, major surface combatants have, with tanker support, patrolled deep into the Southern Ocean since the late 1990s to protect the fisheries of Australia's offshore territories.

The RAN also regularly provided Search and Rescue (SAR) assistance throughout Australian and overseas waters, searching for sailors and aviators lost at sea. Warships have been dispatched deep into the Southern Ocean on rescue missions, and often worked in conjunction with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), with long-range fixed-wing aircraft locating those in distress and the major fleet units rescuing them. Naval aviation also played an important role, with the Sea King and Seahawk helicopters being called upon for SAR missions both at sea and ashore.

The Australian Hydrographic Service charts Australian and adjacent waters for both civil and military requirements. Under international law coastal States are required to ensure

the safety of navigation in their waters, and the RAN has the national responsibility for hydrographic surveys and the creation, maintenance and updating of charts. This surveying and charting responsibility extends from mainland Australia to Antarctica and includes assistance to Papua New Guinea.

The RAN also made a significant contribution to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, with an Amphibious Transport (LPA) on stand-by and a Clearance Diving Team and a helicopter squadron both fully committed for several months.

Many diplomatic operations were undertaken from 1990, including peacekeeping, evacuations, humanitarian assistance, regional and international exercises, and port visits. These operations included support to peacekeeping efforts in Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, Bougainville, and in the Solomon Islands. The purposes of bilateral and multilateral exercises are for each navy to benchmark their skills, pass on their expertise, and to learn from the other participants. This assists international maritime security cooperation, while achieving the aims of Australian foreign policy for a stable and friendly region. Port visits have been conducted throughout the South West Pacific and Asia on a regular basis.

These maritime operations have been conducted during a period of major re-equipping of the RAN. The Navy's force structure is based on the concept of a balanced fleet, providing a range of flexible and responsive options for government across the conflict spectrum. The RAN is structured for combat operations and the inherent flexibility and adaptability of its maritime platforms allows them to be employed across the numerically greater range, but usually lesser threat, of constabulary and diplomatic tasks.

Often forgotten are the major changes to the Navy's inventory over the past 15 years. While new platforms have enhanced the RAN's combat capabilities, considerable administrative and planning effort has been devoted to their introduction, including training and logistic and maintenance support, while the operational tempo has continued unabated.

The *Anzac* class frigates were being progressively introduced at a mid-level capability but, with the RAN's commitment to high-end operations, they are currently undergoing major warfighting capability upgrades. The three *Perth* class guided missile destroyers were decommissioned between 1999 and 2001 leaving a command and control (C2) and an air defence capability deficiency in the fleet which the planned Air Warfare Destroyers will address. Four *Adelaide* class frigates (FFG) are also undergoing a capability upgrade.

HMAS *Westralia* was initially leased and then purchased to provide dedicated tanker support to the surface combatants for long-range and extended endurance missions. The LPAs not only provide a relatively new amphibious capability for the ADF, which has immeasurably extended the range over which the Australian Army may deploy in mass, but they also provide some aspects of the missing C2 capability. An LPA provided the Australian C2 capability during the 2003 Iraq War and in a number of regional operations.

The *Huon* class coastal minehunters are a new capability introduced to manage possible sea mining threats to Australian ports and approaches. The *Collins* class replaced the *Oberon* class submarines, but given the sensitivity of submarine operations, most of their activities are not included in the *Database*. Two older survey ships were decommissioned and two new *Leeuwin* class Hydrographic Ships entered service from 2000. After the demise of fixed wing aviation with the decommissioning of the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*, the Seahawk helicopter was introduced as

an integral component of the FFGs and the Seasprite helicopter is currently being introduced for the *Anzacs*.

Since 1990, the number and intensity of RAN operations has increased, and their geographic locations have broadened, to levels not otherwise experienced since World War II. Linking policy changes and the detailed programs of individual units (neither of which are shown in the *Database*) with the commitment of units to operations illustrates some of the challenges of concurrent operations.

The effect of this increased operations tempo on personnel required the redevelopment of policies to manage the number of days spent at sea by individuals. A series of initiatives has been introduced since the early 1990s to enable Navy people greater opportunity to take their leave entitlements and also to progress career opportunities through the conduct of advanced training and education courses. Achieving these people-focused initiatives remains a challenge during concurrent operations, which has more recently led to the trial and implementation of flexible or multi crewing of some RAN ships.

Another operational response to the increased tempo has been possible because of the interrelated characteristics of maritime power that allow warships to simultaneously operate across the conflict spectrum and undertake multiple tasks over prolonged periods.[4] In 2001 the Government refocussed constabulary operations to the border protection role through Operation RELEX, which increased the naval presence in northern waters to deter and intercept increased numbers of illegal immigrants attempting to enter Australia. Major surface combatants, coastal minehunters, amphibious ships, and hydrographic ships supplemented the patrol boats on border protection duties. Significantly, many of the units initially committed to Operation RELEX were returning from regional deployments or exercises and took up station in northern waters without first returning to port, and were able to remain on station through being resupplied at sea when required.

A first analysis of the *Database of RAN Operations 1990-2005* shows that Navy units acted independently, with single ships being tasked to many operations, or as part of larger forces, and across the trinity of naval roles. They operated as part of RAN Task Groups, where their capabilities were most effectively integrated, and as part of combined Task Groups, because of the interoperability achieved between navies through bilateral and multilateral exercises. They conducted joint operations with the Australian Army or RAAF or both. While the focus of ADF operations is joint in nature, the past 15 years demonstrates a continuing need for the RAN to operate jointly, in a combined force, and also independently.

Although the majority of maritime operations over the past 15 years have been constabulary or diplomatic in nature, many of these operations took place in a high-threat environment and could not have occurred without the naval forces being designed for military operations. This is the key flexibility of a balanced fleet: its ability to operate across the conflict spectrum and the trinity of naval roles, providing governments with the broadest range of naval force options.

1 Royal Australian Navy, *Database of RAN Operations, 1990-2005*, Working Paper 18, Sea Power Centre-Australia, Canberra, 2005.
2 Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2000, pp. 55-7.
3 Minister for Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Canberra, 2000, pp. 52-3.
4 Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2000, pp. 48-51.