

THE MARITIME DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA 1942

Since the late 1980s much of the debate on Australia's defence strategy has been focused on the need to ensure the Defence of Australia (DoA) and its direct approaches.¹ But when it comes to defending Australia, its interests and its values, there appears to be as many visions of what DoA involves as there are observers.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is currently required to meet its DoA strategic objective in combination with four other objectives: to foster the security of our immediate neighbourhood, to promote stability and cooperation in South East Asia, to support strategic security in the wider Asia Pacific region, and to support global security.² In reality, these strategic objectives are not mutually exclusive - the forces required to ensure the DoA are almost identical with those required to achieve the other four objectives. For example, the ADF needs to be expeditionary; whether it is to operate in the remote north of Australia, to support of our near neighbours, to assist when natural and man-made disasters strike, or to defend Australia's interests and international order in any of the world's trouble spots. In essence, the DoA requires a joint and networked ADF using a maritime strategy that is capable of achieving sea control, projecting power from the sea, and defending our sea lines of communication. The perception that the DoA is a continental strategy, protecting the coastline in a last ditch effort to drive away foreign invaders is not supported by the historical evidence.



*Three wartime Australian Prime Ministers: John Curtin, Arthur Fadden and Robert Menzies (Argus Melbourne)*³

Perhaps it is best to deconstruct the continental DoA view by critically examining the events of 1942, when Australia was under serious threat from Japanese forces. By examining the maritime defence of Australia during 1942 we will be in a better position to develop and test our contemporary views in the national security debate. The following radio broadcast was written and presented by Australia's ex-prime minister, the Right Honourable Robert Gordon Menzies, on 18 September 1942. This broadcast was given at a time when Australia was no longer directly threatened by a potential Japanese invasion, but when the very survival of the country was still in the balance.⁴

The influence of sea power on British history has been profound. That a small island in the North Sea, about the size of the State of Victoria, should in the days of Elizabeth, with a population substantially less than that of Australia today, have taken the first momentous steps in a great movement which in two hundred years was to put a ring of colonies around the world seems miraculous, until you remember that this achievement was mainly due to the mariners of England. The story of British expansion is primarily linked with the names of sailormen - of Raleigh, Drake, Frobisher, Cook, Nelson. We sailed wherever ships could sail. We founded many a mighty state.

Our sea power has won our modern wars for us. It has in turn defeated Spain and Holland and France and Germany. Earlier in the present war it became the fashion to dismiss sea power as something outmoded and to concentrate all attention on the air. I shall be the last to minimize the heroism, the efforts, or the importance of the air force. But extreme views are very seldom correct, and we now find ourselves coming back to a balanced judgment which shows that those who thought about these things before the war were not a mile out when they decided that all three arms must be brought up to a reasonable degree of co-ordinated preparedness.

But tonight I want to emphasize to you the importance of the sea - not its diminishing importance, but its growing importance. I believe that it can be established that some of our major setbacks in this war have been caused by our failure to maintain sea power, and that ultimate victory in the war depends upon sea power to a most astonishing extent.

Let me make two things clear. The first is that by sea power I mean strength in both naval and merchant shipping. The second is that I regard as an essential ingredient in any modern fleet a large provision of aircraft carriers and of naval aircraft, since it is abundantly plain that large ships without spotting and bombing and fighting aircraft would be as great an anomaly as large ships without long-range guns. I said just now that some of our reverses were due to our failure to maintain sea power. For an example of this we do not need to go very far from home. Can anybody doubt that the terrible blow delivered to the American fleet at Pearl Harbour and the sinking of our own battleships in the Gulf of Siam gave to Japan in the Western Pacific a degree of naval superiority which made it easy for her to invade Malaya, the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies, Rabaul, New Guinea, and which was beyond question the biggest factor in Japan's swift success?

I know that somebody will retort to this that it was Japanese air power that did it, but my reply is to point out that it was the Japanese naval air arm which attacked Pearl Harbour and sank our battleships, and that without naval supremacy in these Far Eastern waters Japanese land-based aircraft might never have been able to establish themselves, with military forces to defend them, in key strategic points.

Let us look farther afield and glance briefly at the future. Wherever we look we will see that the great problem is shipping - sea power and shipping: numbers of ships, tonnage of ships, quick loading of ships, quick work and turn-around in ports, the protection of ships against the enemy in the air and on the water and under the water.

Great Britain must be fed and supplied, not only as the last stronghold of resistance on the west coast of Europe, but as the vital spearhead for the counter-attack which must precede victory. She can be fed and supplied only by sea, and the great and continuing and bitter battle of the Atlantic is therefore not only her vital struggle but that of the world. Russia must be aided. The only way in which direct aid can be sent into Russia is by water, and the sinking of many a British merchant ship and warship engaged in the dangerous and indeed deadly task of helping Russia is the best proof of the importance which attaches to it. Take the other method of helping Russia so much advocated today - the opening of a second front. The biggest of many big problems which arise in relation to a second front is the problem of shipping. When you remember how many hundreds and hundreds of vessels were required for the evacuation of a relatively small army from Dunkirk without equipment, you may well imagine how staggering would be the force of ships, both civil and military, needed for the transport of a large army with equipment to a hostile coast.

Then consider the Middle East. Every now and then we read of some gallant and battered convoy, with half its ships gone, arriving at Malta or Alexandria. We may also think of the score of ships that must round the Cape to go into the Middle East by the back door. The shipping strain is tremendous. It must all be accepted for the maintenance of a military position which is of far-reaching importance. And yet we are occupying on the western approach to Egypt only a very small German force, merely a trifling fraction of the great German force which is being occupied on the Russian frontier.

And the Far East. The problem of American aid to Australia is mostly a problem of shipping. Our own transport problems in Australia are largely those of shipping. So that, wherever we look, shipping is the great problem. When I was in England last year, the democratic world was losing far more ships than it was building. It is indeed comforting to know that today the United States and Great Britain are somewhat more than overtaking their losses. But we cannot be saved merely by holding our own. The construction, equipping and manning of ships must go on to a point where overwhelming carrying and fighting capacity on the water is developed.

That the United Nations will out-produce the Axis Powers in aircraft and guns and tanks and bombs I do not doubt. The almost incredible industrial resources of the United States alone would guarantee this. But the grim truth remains that you win wars in the long run by bringing superior forces and equipment to the point of battle. Fifty thousand tanks in the United States will not defeat Germany so surely as will five thousand shipped to and actually engaged in Europe. We read of enormous aircraft production in the United States. The output of a week or two shipped to this theatre would give to Australia an impregnable strength to resist Japanese attack.

Any conception of this war is inadequate which envisages a state of affairs in which each Allied country is so furnished with men and equipment that it cannot successfully be attacked, but in which each of them is also without that overwhelming equipment for the sea which will enable it to move to the offensive. It is elementary sense that we cannot begin to win the war - and we have certainly not begun to win it yet - without getting on to the offensive. But to talk of the offensive is mere meaningless chatter unless we have the vital means for conducting the attack. And in this world, with its map reshaped as it has been in the last three years, the essential for the attack is power on the sea.

And so I come back to the conclusion that, once more, the winning of a great war for survival is inextricably bound up with naval power, and with the skill, tenacity and courage of those who "go down to the sea in ships".



HMAS Australia (II) the epitome of Australian sea power during World War II (RAN)

While global alliances and technology have changed, the essential elements of Sir Robert Menzies' speech are enduring. The flexible and adaptable nature of sea power and maritime trade protection remain fundamental to the defence of Australia, its interests, and its values. The reach of the ADF has necessarily remained expeditionary and global. Despite determined philosophical efforts to deny that Australian interests need to be defended outside our direct approaches, our natural security and prosperity has always been associated with the sea and our global maritime links. In this context then it is difficult to sustain a case for a strategy of isolation.

- ¹ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2000, p. 30.
- ² *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, pp. 30-32.
- ³ Source: P. Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-1941*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, facing p. 494.
- ⁴ Originally published as 'Chapter 28 Sea Power' in R.G. Menzies, *The Forgotten People: and other Studies in Democracy*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1943.

