



Framing Australia's Maritime Domain

By Captain Sean Andrews

CAPT Sean Andrews is the Director Sea Power Centre - Australia. Captain Andrews is a Principal Warfare Officer and Under Sea Warfare specialist. Receiving a commission in 1990 as a Seaman Officer, he has completed extensive sea service in Destroyers, Frigates and Patrol Boats. Captain Andrews has enjoyed the full range of operational sea postings including Command.

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY

SEA POWER

SOUNDINGS



Issue 37, 2021

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Introduction

In the popular imagination, Australia is not a maritime nation. Australians remember the ‘Rats of Tobruk’, but the ‘Scrap Iron Flotilla’ that contested Hitler in the Mediterranean is unknown. Australians are familiar with the battle for the ‘Kokoda Track’ but the battle of ‘Leyte Gulf’ is unfamiliar. Australia has never had a ‘grand fleet’.¹ The Navy cannot survive without securing a place in the Australian psyche. The Navy cannot be independent, separate and dislocated from the national consciousness. The Navy must exist within the political establishment, since the Navy is integral to the overall strategic-political enterprise.²

To be generally unaccounted for and politically undervalued is to be politically pretermitted. In 1931, for example, the Government considered abolishing the Navy.³ And, just as the Navy came to be neglected, so maritime strategy came to be neglected by Australian governments. Until the fall of Singapore, Australian governments abdicated oceanic perspective to the Royal Navy. After World War II, Australia sought security with another seapower, this time the United States through the ANZUS treaty.⁴ The point is not that Australia has been foolish to seek out security partnerships. The point is, heretofore Australia has failed to realise the privilege and obligation of her maritime geography.

Australia, the world’s largest island, is surrounded by the Pacific, Indian and Southern Oceans, which include the Coral, Tasman, Timor and Arafura Seas. Larger than the land area of Australia, the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers an area of 8,148,250 km², equivalent to 10 per cent of the world’s oceans.⁵ Disconcerting and comparatively, the number of patrol vessels assigned and patrolling the EEZ to retain Australian sovereignty and security equates to approximately fifty police cars in the whole of Australia.⁶

In truth, Australia has a unique relationship with its oceans. Australia’s maritime search and rescue responsibilities cover 53 million km² of ocean. Ninety-nine per cent of Australia’s trade by weight comes by sea. Australia is a coastal state and relies upon sea trade.⁷



HMAS Ballarat patrolling the North West Shelf of Australia.

This paper examines the Australian view of the maritime domain. It observes Australia's indifference to its maritime geography and reminds us that an undeveloped maritime consciousness does not obviate the need of a seapower strategy.

Just as the Australian strategic culture is dominated by the concept of landscape, so the maritime tradition within the Australian national experience remains largely unexplored.⁸ More to the point; as an Australian maritime tradition has remained uncharted, so the effects of this neglect are unfathomed.

The failure to investigate the relation of Australia to the sea has a profound practical importance. The failure to articulate the importance of the oceans and the relation of Australia to the sea beyond the beach has had a profound political effect. Without a sense of the maritime domain, Australian politics has failed to navigate naval policy. Before World War II, Australian maritime strategy was submerged beneath treasury priorities and party politics.⁹

Even today, long after World War II, there is no tangible example of Australia's determination to exploit the maritime environment to its strategic advantage.



Issue 37, 2021

Setting the Stage

In Australia, the media will report a shark attack, or the occasion of the Bell's Beach Surf Classic, or the annual Sydney to Hobart yacht race, perhaps when navy ships depart for or arrive from an overseas operation, or lastly, when the price of seafood rises during the Christmas season. On other occasions the Australian media and the country's citizens seem indifferent to the ocean. Yet 85 per cent of Australians live within 50 km of the coast.¹⁰ The absurdity of coast-dwellers disconnected from the sea is reflected in the corpus of Australian literature and art, which reflects the land and not the sea.¹¹



Navy One sails south to Hobart during the running of the Rolex Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race 2019.

Curiously unconcerned by the sea, Australia is a maritime state, dependent upon trade brought by sea.¹² To borrow from the American George Friedman, one needs to think of Australia as a creature whose primary circulatory system is outside the body. Such a circulatory system makes for extreme vulnerability and calls for unique defensive systems. In Australia's case, this unique defensive system is in alignment with a maritime power, or it is in détente with maritime powers which might threaten Australia. For Friedman, Australia is in something of a tight corner: insufficiently strong to secure her own interests at sea, and yet dependent upon the sea for security and economic prosperity.¹³

T.B. Millar, in his 1965 study of Australia's defence, observed that the 'first point to remember is that Australia is not a continent but that it is an island'.¹⁴ Millar, in subsequent work, argued that while the oceans that surround Australia have been a barrier to immigration, they have also offered protection from invasion.¹⁵ Millar's point was twofold: first, he emphasised the enormity of the task required to invade Australia; second, he underlined the strategic challenges for defence.



Millar states plainly that any hostile power does not need to invade Australia; they need merely to control the archipelagic sea-lanes upon which Australia depends.¹⁶

Millar lamented wealth enabled by economic surplus created by the export of minerals using imported technology.¹⁷ Insulated by wealth from external affairs, Australians were happy to enjoy their 'own simple, largely philistine, amenities'.¹⁸ On Millar's account, Australians have never funded defence to meet stated policy aims.¹⁹ For a long time, Australian indifference was made possible by the Royal Navy and its bases in Singapore and Aden, since it was the Royal Navy which guaranteed safe passage by sea to the markets of Europe and Asia. But Millar saw through the preposterous veneer of Australian strategic complacency.²⁰ Some five decades after Millar wrote, things remain much the same. Australian strategic policy still fails to conceptualise the oceans, as Australia continues to rely upon the oceans for prosperity and security.²¹

Asserting that Australia must overcome the intellectual and cultural barriers to embracing a maritime concept of strategy,²² Professor Michael Evans paraphrased Lord Bryce when he argued, 'the history of maritime strategic thought in Australia is like the study of snakes in Ireland'.²³ If he overlooked Edmund Barton, Joseph Cook, Andrew Fisher and Alfred Deakin - foundational political figures in Australia - who saw defence as a national responsibility, Evans is not entirely wrong. Most early Australian strategic thinkers imagined Australian strategic effort would be aligned to the broader imperial system. These thinkers were in good company. In 1902, the great American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan recommended Australia frame its defence around a naval force aligned to the imperial framework.²⁴ This idea, that security is best attained in partnership, has been an enduring feature of Australian strategic thinking. But arguably, the concept of strategic partnership undermines a truly Australian approach to its strategy.

In the post-Cold War period, Australians enjoy the full extent of democratic liberty, a good health system, good public education, a fair tax regime and a good standard of living. These things dominate the political debate, and parties canvass votes on the strength of domestic policy. Foreign policy is much less relevant to a largely complacent Australian public. The impact of foreign policy on everyday lives is remote. Consequently, the Australian political class enjoys a significant degree of freedom and bipartisanship on foreign policy matters.²⁵



Charles Miller asserts defence spending neither excites nor polarises. There are no calls for a dramatic increase in defence spending, and no demands to cut defence spending.²⁶ Support for increased defence spending came after the New York and Washington attacks in September 2001 (9/11) and the Bali bombings in 2002. In 2013, 47 per cent of Australians thought defence spending was ‘about right’, and 38 per cent thought Australia should spend more on defence.²⁷ Additionally, Australians are happy with the Australian Defence Force, which is respected organisationally, when compared against other Australian institutions but also when compared against other democratic militaries. Nearly 85 per cent of Australians have ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the Defence Force, with 68 per cent stating they would support their children joining the military.

The Australian Defence Force is one of the most respected militaries in the world.²⁸ However, this general confidence does not translate into a public awareness, discussion, interest, or debate about strategy. People seem content to let things go on ‘as they are’, without a deep understanding of issues.

The 2017 Lowy poll revealed that the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States coincided with a nearly 50 per cent drop in Australians’ trust of the United States. Yet, the Trump presidency did not undermine Australians’ support for the ANZUS alliance, with more than three-quarters of Australians (77 per cent) saying the alliance is ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important for our security.²⁹ Australians also are uncomfortable about the behaviour of China, with 46 per cent of Australians saying it is likely ‘China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years’. However, Australians continue to see China, co-equally with the United States, as our most important relationships, and despite their concerns of China’s potential to become a military threat, 79 per cent see China as more of an economic partner than a military threat.³⁰

The polls offer a precis of broad-brush Australian opinions regarding defence, world events and Australia’s global relationship. But polls do not capture the nuance and complexity of current affairs. For example, polls do not capture the pace and implication of China’s maritime build-up, which includes the rise of the Chinese maritime militia. This may change. In January 2020, the Deputy Commander of the United States Coastguard stated that ‘Fishing has become an instrument of national power’, and China has by far the world’s largest long-distance fishing fleet.³¹ At the same time, commentators noted that the primary purpose of China’s artificial islands in the South China Sea was to provide direct support of China’s civilian and para-naval forces using coercion to advance Chinese territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific.³²



Chinese Navy farewells HMAS Warramunga from Qingdao Port, in China.

Fifty years after T.B. Millar made the point, fish might prompt Australia to contemplate the maritime domain.³³ Coupled with territorial claims, the impact of excessive fishing in the Indo-Pacific has the potential to be a significant threat that undermines maritime security and the rules-based order of the region. Provocative acts in the Indo-Pacific by fishing boats supported by maritime law-enforcement vessels are creating unnecessary tension between coastal states. They will strain regional harmony and security in the Indo-Pacific.

Seapower and the State

The critical question is, what is seapower? Alfred Thayer Mahan articulated his ideas in *The Influence of Seapower on History*, which is considered the preeminent work. While there is much to criticise in Mahan's writings, academics consider him more right than wrong.³⁴



Mahan did over-emphasise the utility of seapower in comparison to land power, and his narrow aperture of historical example does exclude cases of states that have prospered without the remotest link to the sea.³⁵ However, British academic Paul Kennedy notes, ‘Mahan is and will always remain, the point of reference and departure for any work on seapower’.³⁶

Mahan never provided a definition of seapower. The significant British thinker, retired British naval officer and Cambridge don Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, in his most famous work, *Statesmen and Seapower*, provides the classic definition:³⁷

*Seapower is that form of naval strength, which enables its possessor to send his armies and commerce across those stretches of sea and ocean, which lie between his countries or the countries of his allies and those territories to which he needs to access in war; and to prevent his enemy from doing the same.*³⁸

Looking to application, Richmond said the politician ‘is the civil authority responsible for the maintenance of this power in peace and its effective use in war as a national weapon’.³⁹ But Richmond died suddenly in 1946 and could not complete his intended series on the relationship between policy and action, by examining the primary strategy of war. Richmond wanted to understand the political leader’s problem, not the campaigns or tactics, but what ministers intended and how commanders might act at sea to achieve the intentions of politics.⁴⁰ Richmond saw the special responsibility of the political leader and considered the political misgrasp of strategic policy more injurious to the state than the failure of minor tactics.⁴¹ To Richmond, it was in the practical execution of political intention that seapower found its fullest expression.

Foundations of Australian Seapower

Politically and at the time of Federation in Australia, seapower was not an alien concept; it was merely something the Royal Navy and British Admiralty did. But, on 1 March 1901, the Governor-General became Commander-in-Chief, and Australia’s defence forces were officially recognised by the titles Commonwealth Naval Forces and Commonwealth Military Forces. The ships inherited by the Commonwealth Naval Forces from the state-centric navies were old and inadequate because Naval Forces had been apportioned just 10 per cent of the Commonwealth Military Forces budget.

In 1901-02, the Navy was allocated just £67,000; the army’s allocation amounted to £638,000. Despite the disparity, a dilapidated navy was not a primary national concern because the British Admiralty was in charge of Australian naval policy.⁴²



However, the growth of foreign naval power in the Pacific alarmed local naval authorities, in particular Captain William Creswell, who hypothesised those British forces might withdraw from the Australian station to service British strategic policy. Australia, the island continent, was vulnerable and open to attack, and with communications severed, industrial and economic desolation was a genuine risk. Captain Creswell stated in his 1902 parliamentary report:

*The spectacle of some 5,000,000 Australians, with an Army splendidly equipped, unable to prevent the burning of a cargo of wool in sight of Sydney Heads, is only the ordinary consequence of a policy of naval impotence.*⁴³

This idea was underlined famously in June 1903, when the Governor of Victoria, Sir George Sydenham Clarke, a British Army engineer, gave one of the most famous speeches regarding Australia's duty to the ocean, titled *The Navy and the Nation*, at the Fitzroy Town Hall in Melbourne.⁴⁴ According to the *Argus* newspaper, the town hall was full, and in attendance were the Chief Justice, Sir John Madden, and the Minister for Defence, Sir John Forrest, and Senators Fraser and FitzGibbon, among other dignitaries.⁴⁵

Sir George argued that seapower secured for Australia undisputed possession of the resources of the land, albeit at the cost of some £620 million in 1903. Indeed, Sir George stated that Australia had a more significant stake in seaborne commerce than England. Thus, it was vital for Australia to understand the nuances of naval war and its importance to the security of trade and the availability warships on the Australian station to ensure the security of the vital trade routes.⁴⁶

In response, Sir John Forrest stated that Australia had become accustomed to peace and security, but also did not think that the taxpayers of the 'mother country' should pay for Australia's security. The Royal Navy cost £34 million per year, and Australia should consider contributing an equal degree to ensure the nation's security.⁴⁷ Those present in the Fitzroy Town Hall reportedly endorsed these statements that night, but it was the shrewd assessment of the Chief Justice that is enduring.

Sir John Madden thanked the Governor for his sage words. He then asserted that, first, the vice of all democracies was to insist on a defence force that would not attack an enemy. Second, that the capability chosen would be spread too thin. Ships in Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney, for example, would be rendered useless. Last, he stated that the final vice of democracy was that when not knowing what to do, democracies rarely sought the counsel of those with the requisite knowledge.⁴⁸ Senator Fraser closed the meeting, stating that the speech had been of great value and that it would be of advantage to the people of Australia.



The Navy and the Nation speech was printed by order of the Senate on 26 June 1903, two weeks after it was presented at the Fitzroy Town Hall.⁴⁹ Momentum was gathering for the pursuit of an Australian naval force.

Arguably, if Admiral William Creswell is the father of the Royal Australian Navy, Alfred Deakin, Australia's second Prime Minister, was the Navy's principal architect.⁵⁰ In 1907, Deakin, who was also Minister for External Affairs, spoke to the new parliament stating that Australia must fund a defence force.⁵¹ But the emphasis of Deakin's argument was on the Navy. Deakin saw that Australia, an island continent, must use the oceans as it relies upon the seas more than any other part of the British Empire.⁵²

In 1910, Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson, Royal Navy, visited Australia. Henderson's terms of reference were to consider all matters concerning the formation of an Australian fleet. Tabled on 1 March 1911, Henderson's report suggested a Navy of eight battlecruisers, ten light cruisers, eighteen destroyers and twelve submarines. But though the Henderson Report took account of factors such as local economics, population growth and trade, it lacked a deeper strategic rationale. Nonetheless, Henderson's assessment aligned with Admiral Creswell's thinking: these ships and bases around the coast would support the empire in Command of the Sea.⁵³

The 1912 Government under Prime Minister Andrew Fisher supported Henderson's plan and claimed there was no limit to the expenditure Australia may need to secure her defences.⁵⁴ The First Sea Lord, Admiral Jackie Fisher, thought similarly, but the moment Fisher retired, the United Kingdom took up a less vigorous policy position. The Royal Navy came to be rather more unconcerned about the Royal Australian Navy, and the Admiralty failed to develop plans for the British fleet in the Pacific, or for the inclusion of Australian forces in any British Pacific strategy.⁵⁵ In general terms, what was lacking was a collaborative, agreed-upon strategic plan for potential conflict in two hemispheres, which would have offered the Australian Government the political flexibility to prioritise where to send the fleet and manage the expectations of the British Admiralty, whose priority was the threat of a rising Germany.⁵⁶

Deakin's Government considered an Australian investment in seapower should entitle Australia to a say in imperial foreign affairs. But Australia struggled to be heard as Britain contemplated matters of war and peace. Deakin respected the overarching expertise and responsibility of the Royal Navy, but he felt that the protection of Australian interests was an Australian responsibility.⁵⁷



The advent of Australia's navy occurred during a period described by the preeminent American historian Clark G. Reynolds as the golden age for naval thought: 1867 to 1914. Clark argues that this half-century was a most dynamic period, both intellectually and culturally, for civilisation, the momentum provided by the industrial and democratic revolutions occurring globally.⁵⁸ With the advent of technology such as the telephone and telegraph, aircraft and steamships, global distances shrank. The exchange of thought across all fields of scholarly endeavour occurred freely across the Western world. The growth in weapons technology in both land and sea platforms with only a perfunctory acknowledgement of principles grounded in historical experience motivated several historian-theorists to pursue more in-depth enquiry and analysis into the issues of state and the sea.⁵⁹

The critical theorists that would influence Australian strategic maritime thinking form the Anglo-American school. In the United Kingdom, the leading thinkers were Sir John Laughton, Vice Admiral Sir Philip Colomb and Sir Julian Corbett, who were joined by the Americans, Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan.⁶⁰ Two efforts stand out, Alfred Mahan's 1890 *The Influence of Seapower on History, 1660-1783*, and Julian Corbett's 1911 publication, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Detractors argue that these men derived their claims for command of the sea from the age of sail. Subsequently, Mahan and Corbett were discounted by World War I naval planners, who were gripped by the battleship.⁶¹ However, Mahan and Corbett remain the founding philosophers of seapower; and contemporary thinkers recognise the enduring relevance of their ideas.⁶²

Arguably, this golden age of naval thought informed Australian leadership about the utility of seapower. Recognising the efforts of the Royal Australian Navy in World War I, Prime Minister Billy Hughes made especial reference to HMAS *Australia*, the battlecruiser that deterred the German East Asiatic Squadron from raiding the Pacific Ocean. Hughes declared, 'but for the *Australia* the great cities of Australia would have been reduced to ruins, coastwise shipping sunk, and communications with the outside world cut off'.⁶³ For Hughes, the utility of Australian seapower was obvious. Yet, in the long calm lee of the post-war peace, this utility has come to appear less certain.⁶⁴

An Australian Approach to Maritime Strategic Thought

Colin S. Gray, the British-American Professor of International Relations, noted that all strategy is grand strategy.⁶⁵ John B. Hattendorf, a Professor of History at the United States Naval War College in 2013, argued that nations had practised maritime strategy for centuries.



However, the comprehensive analysis only began just over a century ago at the end of wars conducted at sea under sail.⁶⁶ At the end of the nineteenth century, technological change at sea necessitated an intellectual investment to understand the requirements of maritime power, the function of the Navy and the relation of seapower to national policy.⁶⁷

Arguably, the current contest in the Indo-Pacific requires more profound analysis. First, to re-examine the limitations of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Second, to understand the threshold and limits of asymmetric maritime manoeuvre. Third, to explore the utility of maritime forces, both naval and para-naval in non-traditional security environments. And lastly, to pursue opportunities for cooperation to reduce the contest and reinforce the validity of a rules-based approach for Indo-Pacific maritime states.

Australian academic Peter Layton asserts maritime strategies are regaining intellectual prominence.⁶⁸ In Australia, there are several schools of maritime thought.⁶⁹ The first school is the *sea denial school*, as championed by the 1987 defence white paper. More recently, Australian academic Hugh White argued that sea denial using a pure subsurface force and fighter aircraft is achievable for Australia, even against a significant power if we approach the problem single-mindedly.⁷⁰ The chief flaw in White's plan is that Australia is dependent upon the oceans for trade. As T.B. Millar convincingly argues, a state does not have to invade Australia; it merely has to control the sea-lanes and disrupt Australia's trade.⁷¹

The *sea denial school* is disputed by the second school, the *joint maritime strategy school*. Following the doctrines of joint maritime strategy, the Australian Defence Force should be structured to undertake expeditionary operations in its primary operating area and not be fixated on Sino-American regional competition.⁷² Among the advocates of this school, Professor Michael Evans of the Land Warfare Centre argues the importance of land power and its historical relevance for Australian policymakers, who have used the army to uphold national interests in security crises from World War II to East Timor in 1999.⁷³

The third school, the *wide-ranging maritime school*, was proposed in 2012 by the then Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Griggs, and retired admiral and academic James Goldrick. This school focuses on using the sea as the essential infrastructure for global communication, including for the protection of maritime trade. Griggs argued that a maritime strategy is not about navies; a maritime strategy is an inherently joint and integrated concept across the whole of government as part of a broader national security effort.⁷⁴



In broad terms, I accept the propositions of the wide-ranging maritime school. I take an all-round look, accepting - as Corbett has it - that events at sea are consequential since they affect the land, where people live.

Politics, Policy and Maritime Strategy

Australia's strategic thought has not always been clear, or consistent. In 1937 Prime Minister Joseph Lyons stated, '*the first line of security against invasion is naval Defence . . . and it is preferable that we fight him away from our shores*'.⁷⁵ Five decades later, the Hawke Government's Minister for Defence, Kim Beazley, said (oddly) that 'Australia is not a maritime nation and its people do not sustain much interest in Australian maritime strategy'.⁷⁶ Beazley believed that Australia was not interested in defence and noted a comprehensive 1987 poll in which the public rated the Royal Australian Navy last when considering defence.⁷⁷ In 2017, Western Australian Liberal Senator Linda Reynolds lamented that Australia has no maritime consciousness and a limited grasp of seapower. Reynolds claimed people in her state did not know that a shipbuilding industry existed in Western Australia, let alone a significant naval base on Garden Island near Rockingham, south of Perth.⁷⁸



First Evolved Cape Class patrol boat ready for launch on dock. Images Courtesy of Austal.



This inconstancy is reflected in Australian defence white papers. Beyond overt statements of policy, defence strategy, procurement and budget, white papers are aspirational; conveying the deep political ambitions of the governments that issue them. For this reason, it is fascinating to survey the development of white papers since 1976 (when the first defence white paper was issued) and to catch the nuance of political ideology. Among the seven white papers that have been issued, perhaps the Hawke Government's 1987 white paper is best known for its core policy outcomes.⁷⁹

According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, there was bipartisan support for defence policy in 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996 and 1998. Both Australian political parties were content that defence sat in an ambiguous middle ground that would enable the political discourse to focus on other, more popular political targets⁸⁰ since an attack upon Australia was considered remote.⁸¹

However, just as Paul Dibb's important 1986 review refreshed the established 'Forward Defence' strategic outlook, so contemporary strategic thinking will benefit from renewed debate.⁸² This debate has recently been lacking.

In November 2012, the Labor Government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued a National Security Strategy, but without tabling it in the House of Representatives and allowing political scrutiny.⁸³ In May 2013, the Labor Government released another defence white paper. This 2013 version adhered to the capabilities and aspirations of the previous one.⁸⁴ The subsequent Coalition Government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull released its defence white paper in 2016. But again, continuing a trend, there was an absence of political debate.

Arguably, turbulent political times driven by internal party politics forestalled strategic debate and the coherent argument which obtains. In fewer than seven years, there were three defence white papers and two statements on national security. The risk is that the veritable Niagara of white papers undermines the strategic narrative and throws the relationship between Australia and the region off balance.⁸⁵

In 2013, the phrase 'maritime strategy' emerged from the shadows to find explicit expression in defence white papers. Through a maritime lens, the Director of the Australian Sea Power Centre, Captain Justin Jones, considered the years 2012-13 a watershed in Australian strategic thinking. Jones observed that during the 37 years of defence white paper publication, the concept of a 'maritime strategy' occurred in only half of those white papers.⁸⁶



Issue 37, 2021

In 1976, the defence white paper thought any confrontation that Australia would be involved in would be initially ‘maritime in character’.⁸⁷ The 1987 white paper highlighted the importance of maritime forces because of our geography.⁸⁸ The 1994 white paper used the term ‘maritime forces’ in the context of defence in-depth.⁸⁹

The 2000 defence white paper was the first to use the term ‘maritime strategy’ and allude to the key principles and fundamentals of the wide-ranging maritime school’s concept of a maritime strategy.⁹⁰

The 2009 defence white paper introduced the term ‘sea control’ as a contributing element to Australia’s military strategy in the nation’s primary operational environment.⁹¹ The term ‘sea control’ was not applied in the classical sense, rather as a term of art - peculiar to the 2009 white paper - and to mean ‘strictly limited control’.⁹² The 2013 defence white paper referenced ‘maritime strategy’ ten times. The white paper dedicated a section to this concept, and the applicability of a strategic maritime approach to Australia’s security.⁹³



A guest at the launch reads The 2013 Defence White Paper.



In the 2016 defence white paper, the terms ‘maritime strategy’, ‘sea denial’ and ‘sea control’ are absent, but the term ‘sea line of communications’ is mentioned four times.⁹⁴ These proximate sea lines of communications receive the same priority as a secure and resilient Australia and are a vital defence interest.⁹⁵ What is interesting is that the 2016 white paper offers the oceans a distinct strategic prominence in which the oceans emerge in argument as an explicit centre of gravity.⁹⁶

The most recent white paper (Defence Strategic Update 2020) is notably candid about Australia’s strategic environment. Again, the ideas that underpin the wide-ranging maritime school are apparent. The paper states,

*Our region is in the midst of the most consequential strategic realignment since the Second World War, and trends including military modernisation, technological disruption and the risk of state-on-state conflict are further complicating our nation’s strategic circumstances... The Indo-Pacific is at the centre of greater strategic competition, making the region more contested and apprehensive.*⁹⁷

But the ocean has never been far from view. In the previous decade, the white paper of 2000 stated that the key to defending Australia is to control the sea and air approaches to provide the maximum freedom of action for our forces.⁹⁸ The concept of this maritime strategy is that land forces would support naval and air forces in controlling those approaches. Additionally, Australia’s force posture would be defensive. However, to conclude hostilities quickly, Australia would be prepared to attack hostile forces as far from Australia as possible, even the hostile home base.⁹⁹ This argument appears strategically ambivalent, avoiding specification of the capability required to carry out the stated maritime strategic aims.¹⁰⁰ In 2009, maritime strategy remained unchanged and focused on the northern approaches to Australia. However, the Australian Navy would be required to establish *sea control*, which the white paper considered a difficult military problem.¹⁰¹

In 2013, an unambiguous maritime strategy detailed the requirement for a force that could impose sea control, sea denial, strike, and power projection. The white paper details two key components as a theme of ‘an active and visible domestic and regional force posture based upon adequate levels of defence preparedness’.¹⁰²

Within a constrained fiscal environment, the Government expected this strategy to enable Australia to influence a strategically reforming Indo-Pacific.¹⁰³ But fundamentally, only the barest minimum of defence objectives were achievable.



However, the 2013 maritime strategy is located amidst the principal tasks for the Australian Defence Force as policy direction as part of a broader Australian military strategy.¹⁰⁴ This is usual, as Australia has been a regional maritime power since the end of World War II and has consistently evolved its military (maritime) capability to suit its environment.¹⁰⁵ Arguably, a maritime strategy, since it is inherently defensive, is a logical response to progressively foreseeable challenges in the Indo-Pacific that broader strategic guidance is slow in acknowledging.

In 2016, the defence white paper stated that ‘a secure, resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication, is Australia’s first Strategic Defence Interest’.¹⁰⁶ This claim recognises the maritime geography, pivotal to Australian strategic planning. But the nuance of strategic geography has not always been so plain. For example, the 2009 defence white paper uses the terms *defeat* and *deter* to describe the principal tasks of the Australian Defence Force. These verbs are from the Australian Army mission planning guidance.¹⁰⁷ But this is army guidance, not mission planning guidance which recognises or acknowledges *specific maritime task language*. In contrast, 2017 doctrine from the United Kingdom is deft, recognising and speaking to the utility of maritime forces:

*Maritime forces provide a global, national presence through three classical roles - warfighting, maritime security and Defence Engagement. The unique attributes of the maritime environment allow maritime forces to provide a persistent and versatile military capability free of the liability of extensive host-nation support. The long-standing principle of freedom of navigation in international waters allows maritime forces to poise without commitment, to project national influence and develop understanding while remaining highly mobile to exploit opportunities or to counter emerging threats. Ultimately maritime forces provide a mobile, responsive and persistent basis for military capabilities, which can rapidly move up and down a spectrum of soft and hard power options to support national objectives.*¹⁰⁸

In 2010, Australian Maritime Doctrine considered the span of maritime tasks - *constabulary*, *diplomatic* and *warfighting* - and their subordinate tasks, to be representative rather than specific, as the missions would rarely be exclusive. The doctrine reflected reality; there would always be anomalies because more than one of the roles and several of the tasks can be carried out concurrently.¹⁰⁹ The Australia Maritime Doctrine does detail the attributes of Australian maritime power, which are understandably similar to those of the United Kingdom. What is interesting is that the basis for the Navy to undertake constabulary and diplomatic roles is predicated upon the ability to undertake maritime combat roles.¹¹⁰ The reason is that the resources and core skills developed for warfighting support the skills required to undertake diplomacy and constabulary missions.



Maritime Security as Policy

Notably, and typically, maritime security has been considered through the lens of foreign policy. For example, Australia's defence relationship with Japan was underpinned by the *2008 Memorandum on Defence Cooperation*, which provided the framework for engagement between Australian and Japanese forces. A catalogue of activities presented included potential cooperation on counter-terrorism, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and maritime security.¹¹¹ Further opportunities would be explored with South Korea to increase participation in maritime security activities. The 2009 white paper stated that Australia was keen to strengthen the defence relationship with India, noting our shared maritime interests, rules-based order, and desire to combat global terrorism.¹¹²

Second, Australian maritime security is expressed through regional cooperation, and capacity and capability development focused on the Pacific region, which included a further commitment by Australia to ensure the development of a professional defence force in Papua New Guinea. Additionally, Australia's determination to provide the capability building, capacity development and cooperation would be pursued through the Pacific Patrol Boat Program. The program is considered a flagship defence cooperation activity in the Pacific and a significant policy success since its inception in the 1980s.



The crew of Papua New Guinea Pacific Patrol Boat, HMPNGS Rabaul, line the deck for the last time.



Through the white paper, the Government directed the Department of Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and other government agencies to develop a regional approach to maritime security in the Pacific. The purpose is to enable Pacific Island states to protect their maritime resources and enforce sovereignty.¹¹³ Arguably the white paper does not define maritime security because strategic ambiguity affords policy flexibility to enable broad response options within the prevailing strategic environment.

The 2013 Australian defence white paper further developed Australia's concept of maritime security through three foreign policy initiatives: international cooperation; risk mitigation and counter-terrorism; and capability development and capacity building. All three initiatives had a particular regional focus.

First, supporting international cooperation is achieved by contributing and committing to United Nations and US-led operations through Australia's continuing participation in regional peacekeeping missions and maritime security tasks, predominately in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean region.¹¹⁴

The second initiative is centred on counter-terrorism and maritime risk mitigation in the predominately maritime environment of the Indo-Pacific. A key outcome is the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes by following international law, the prevention of aggression within the region and freedom of navigation and unfettered access to shipping lanes which are vital the trade interests and the global economy.¹¹⁵ Additionally, maritime security cooperation with the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia and Laos includes counter-terrorism activities.¹¹⁶ A most recent example of this is Operation AUGURY; since 2017 the Australian Defence Force has trained over 10,000 members of the Philippines armed forces. Key elements of this training included urban combat, joint operations and maritime security.

The third initiative restated Australia's commitment to enhancing maritime security in the Pacific region through capability development and capacity building, delivering critical programs such as the Pacific Maritime Security Program. This program includes the supply of new patrol boats, an information fusion centre, aerial surveillance and advisory support.¹¹⁷ Thus, we see Australia's concept of maritime security is multi-departmental. Defence and Foreign Affairs will assume the lead on some aspects, but a whole-of-government effort is required.



Sailors from the Philippines Navy work to secure HMAS *Larrakia* alongside the wharf at Zamboanga, Philippines, as part of Operation AUGURY

The 2016 Australian defence white paper restated that Australia's foreign policy initiatives would be achieved through maritime security activities. First, Australian maritime security depends upon contribution and cooperation with the United States and regional partners.¹¹⁸ Second, the Pacific Maritime Security Program remains a cornerstone of Australia's defence engagement across the South Pacific.¹¹⁹ Third, maritime security activities would be used for the advancement of cooperation and enhancement of bilateral relations with like-minded partners in South East Asia.¹²⁰

The white paper stated that the Government would prioritise Australia's participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). But other multilateral security frameworks, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, will be used to engage in security dialogue to discuss partnership opportunities to address regional security issues and advance interoperability between ADMM-Plus members.¹²¹



What is evident from a review of Australian defence white papers is that Australian maritime security operations recognise the importance of international cooperation with allies and like-minded partners. Australia's broad concept of maritime security allows policy flexibility to enable a variety of responses in the prevailing security and strategic environment.

Maritime Strategy

Preeminent British academic Hew Strachan argues that maritime strategy faces a problem of definition, even more so than those confronting what theorists call military strategy. For traditionalists, all strategy is military. However, for the modernists, is there a narrower definition? Is military strategy something only armies do? Moreover, to the British, naval strategy is something the Royal Navy does. By contrast, a maritime strategy is a broader concept, embracing a nation's use of the sea.¹²² Colin S. Gray is eloquent when he states:

*Traditionally, a seapower is a country with a maritime, as contrasted with a continental, orientation in its strategic outlook that depends critically upon maritime communications for its economic well-being. Such a country requires a good measure of naval control of maritime communications for national security. It has an influential community for the advancement of maritime aspects of the national interest.*¹²³

However, seapower and, indeed, maritime strategy has its detractors. In 2013, Dr Albert Palazzo of the Land Warfare Studies Centre professed the 'end of maritime strategy' as the precision of lethality of weapon systems would make it impossible for navies to close upon a hostile coast.¹²⁴ Andrew Davies of the Australian Strategy and Policy Institute also questions the historical utility of seapower. Davies argues that unlike the laws of nature, seapower is a constructed concept. He asserts that seapower has been successful for a significant period and that current practitioners and theorists may not apply the intellectual rigour required in a contemporary environment. Past successes applied to future strategy without sufficient thought is a genuine risk. However, in a region without land bridges, such as the Indo-Pacific, the sea is the only medium.¹²⁵ In our region, we *must* consider seapower.

Hew Strachan asserts that the end of the Cold War in 1990 was a more significant strategic revolution than the 9/11 attacks that initiated the global war on terror. The end of the Cold War removed the bipolar balance and reduced the prominence of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the use of war, specifically the use of land power for the advancement of policy, became much easier.¹²⁶ However, the most significant outcome was a negative one: the four decades of military planning, including scenario construction that had driven capability procurement and technical innovation, left an intellectual vacuum; this was an unintended consequence for Western militaries.¹²⁷



Issue 37, 2021

The effect upon the post-Cold War Anglo-American school of maritime thought was profound, subsequently impacting the development of Western maritime strategy and the development of naval policy. First, the move from blue-water navies to brown-water navies witnessed operations away from the oceans towards the littorals. Second, there was a deliberate shift from undersea operations to above-water operations. Maritime missions became deliberately visible. Moreover, procurement trends shifted from submarines towards aircraft carriers and air-capable ships.

Lastly, there has been a restoration of traditional forms of maritime strategy. First, navies returned to their preeminent role of trade security and political engagement and influence without resorting to war. States were rediscovering the political utility of seapower, by deploying their navies in coalition fleets to ensure the maintenance of good order at sea - for example, the suppression of piracy and terrorism in the Gulf of Aden. These missions have a long pedigree in Western navies and indeed reflect a very nineteenth-century approach to maritime strategy and are applicable in peace and war.¹²⁸ Further, and most succinctly, Strachan argues that this is policy as opposed to a more traditional 'strategy' - reinforcing the political utility of maritime forces in the absence of hostilities.¹²⁹



The boarding party from HMAS Toowoomba boards a dhow carrying during a patrol in the Gulf of Aden.



Finally, a prevailing argument is that significant effort is expended identifying new threats, which in reality are not new. For example, contemporary advocates of maritime strategies stress that the bulk of the world's trade is seaborne and that the bulk of the world's population is coastal. This global trade and coastal trend reflects the condition in the nineteenth century and these trends reflect continuity, not change. Moreover, these were the axioms that contributed to the theories developed by Mahan and Corbett. The trend and elevation of threats to secure resources are not helpful; today's challenges, such as globalisation, climate change, pandemics, urbanisation and shortages of resources such as fish and water, could become opportunities for cooperation.¹³⁰

Recent Australian strategic statements considered Australia's security environment of most immediate importance to include Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Pacific Island states and maritime South-East Asia. The wider Indo-Pacific region, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, through which most of Australia's trade activity occurs, is central to Australian national security and economic prosperity.¹³¹

Australia's security environment is considerable and approximates to 10 per cent of the earth's surface.¹³² Moreover, Australia's strategic intent is ambitious; the stated expectation is that the Australian Defence Force will be capable of conducting independent combat to defend Australia and contribute to global coalition operations.¹³³

Defence cuts, reductions or lack of investment do not aid strategic ambition. Moreover, a strategy is about choices, and driving those choices are shortages of resources rather than abundance.¹³⁴ All elements of defence in achieving their directed ends and means would potentially be affected by funding pressures. However, it would be more acute for the Navy as the span of maritime tasks is fused within grand strategy and national policy.¹³⁵ The current Australian defence policy states that deterrence is a principal task without explicitly stating what maritime capability is required; this is problematic since a global remit is implied.¹³⁶

Conclusion

Overtly, Australia may seem oblivious to maritime strategy. The Australian culture is more obviously reflective of the bush, or more precisely the regional littorals in which the bulk of Australians live. But gradually, this lack of awareness of Australia's maritime geography is altering as the focus on the world's politics centres on the Indo-Pacific. Historically, Australian political leadership has grasped the utility of maritime forces.



The golden age of maritime thought witnessed the advent of Australian seapower and the arrival of the Australian fleet. It was an era necessitated by technical change, the requirements of maritime power, and interpreting the relationship between seapower and national policy. In Australia, the utility of seapower in World War I was demonstrable and in preparation for World War II seapower was a preeminent requirement for Australia's security. Intellectually, the Anglo-American school of maritime thought influences Australian maritime thinkers. However, tension exists in applying a concept of Australian seapower that services Australian national policy. Nevertheless, a unity exists in the notion that any strategic maritime thinking of seapower is more than just about navies. It is a national security effort.

Australian defence policy statements reflect the political aspirations of Government. Additionally, Australia has been a regional naval power since the end of World War II and has consistently evolved and procured maritime capability to suit the strategic environment. Australian defence policy statements have alluded to a maritime character or the importance of maritime forces because of Australia's geography.



HMAS Warramunga encounters heavy weather enroute to Korea.

However, the language that pervades the discourse of the maritime domain is not consistent. Therefore, an opportunity exists to apply a disciplined methodology of standard nomenclature apparent to Western and like-minded maritime forces.

The cessation of the Cold War brought changes to maritime force structures and witnessed the return to traditional concepts of a maritime strategy focused upon the maintenance of good order at sea. Current-day maritime missions differ from those of the Cold War, but they are similar to the nineteenth-century maritime strategy that was applicable in peace and war. What is evident is that the range of maritime tasks navigates policy and strategy, intersecting the realms of traditional and non-traditional maritime challenges. For Australia, cultural indifference does not mean strategic ignorance. Seapower is more than hard power; it is a nation's purpose for the ocean.



Endnotes

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- ¹⁰⁵ Mark Thomson, "The Challenge of Coherence: Strategic Guidance, Capability, and Budgets", in *History as Policy Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy*, ed. Ron Huisken and Meredith Thatcher (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 139-140. Additionally, and most interestingly, in May 2017 the Government released its Naval Shipbuilding Plan, which proposed spending nearly \$90 billion on new ships and submarines, one billion dollars on shipyard infrastructure, and \$25 million on workforce growth and skilling activities. The Government stated, 'This Naval Shipbuilding Plan is just the beginning of the journey. This national program of work will be implemented in a structured and planned way, delivering benefits that will be sustainable and enduring. We will establish advanced manufacturing, high technology research and development, and heavy engineering sectors for generations of Australians to come. We are embarking on a great national endeavour.' The shipbuilding industry was considered by Alfred Thayer Mahan to be a vital element of sea power, and the boom and bust nature of Australian shipbuilding has been a constant narrative. While there will be challenges, as argued by commentators, the Australian industry group viewed this industrial commitment as positive and achievable.
- ¹⁰⁶ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 33.
- ¹⁰⁷ M.B. Ryan, *Land Warfare Doctrine* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), 21, Fitzgibbon, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, 53-54; Smith, *Defending Australia and its National Interests*, 28-29; and Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 71-72.
- ¹⁰⁸ M. Mitchell, *Joint Doctrine 0-10, UK Maritime Power* (Swindon: Ministry of Defence, 2017), 6-7. Also see Section 2 - The attributes of maritime forces, for precise definitions, 36-39.
- ¹⁰⁹ R. Crane, *Australian Maritime Doctrine* (Canberra: Sea Power Centre - Australia, 2010), 99-101. See page 100 for the diagram detailing the *Span of Maritime Tasks*.
- ¹¹⁰ Crane, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, 86-91. These pages define the characteristics and attributes of maritime forces.
- ¹¹¹ Fitzgibbon, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, 95.
- ¹¹² Fitzgibbon, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, 96.
- ¹¹³ Fitzgibbon, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, 98-99.
- ¹¹⁴ Smith, *Defence White Paper 2013*, 17 and 65.
- ¹¹⁵ Smith, *Defence White Paper 2013*, 25.
- ¹¹⁶ Smith, *Defence White Paper 2013*, 60-62.
- ¹¹⁷ Smith, *Defence White Paper 2013*, 63-64.
- ¹¹⁸ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 33.
- ¹¹⁹ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 56.
- ¹²⁰ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 75.
- ¹²¹ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 130.
- ¹²² Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 151-152.



¹²³ Colin Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 6-7.

¹²⁴ Albert Palazzo, "The End of Maritime Strategy", in *A Maritime School of Strategic Thought for Australian Perspectives*, ed. Justin Jones (Canberra: Seapower Centre - Australia, 2013), 113-118. While Palazzo decries the pending destruction of the Navy in war, he also states that the Navy should acquire more small ships as they present a higher risk of acceptance to Government. Additionally, faster, smaller assault craft should be acquired to transport the army ashore, which undermines his first point of risk to naval ships. Palazzo is not the first to question the usefulness of ships as a viable capability.

¹²⁵ Andrew Davies, "The Role of Sea Power in the 21st Century", in *The Naval Contribution to National Security and Prosperity*, ed. Andrew Forbes (Canberra: Sea Power Centre - Australia, 2014), 201-207. For further reading, see the discussion between Hugh White and James Goldrick. Goldrick responds to Hugh Whites assertion that Australia should not build warships, Goldrick counters that White's opinion is a mix of bad history, misrepresentation of current naval thinking and a continuing tendency for White to overvalue vulnerable technology when making his case against ships. See <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2012/september/1346903463/hugh-white/middling-power> and <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/long-we-use-ships-move-cargo-navy-will-need-control-sea>

¹²⁶ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 156.

¹²⁷ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 156.

¹²⁸ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 157.

¹²⁹ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 157.

¹³⁰ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, 157-158.

¹³¹ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 39.

¹³² See P. Dibb, "Is Strategic Geography Relevant to Australia's Current Defence Policy?", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2 (June 2006): 247-264; and D.J. Kilcullen, "Australian Statecraft: The Challenge of Aligning Policy with Strategic Culture", *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 4 (November 2007): 49-62.

¹³³ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 18; and S. Morrison and L. Reynolds, eds., *Defence Strategic Update 2020* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020).

¹³⁴ A. Carr and P. Dean, "The Funding Illusion: 2% of GDP Furphy in Australia's Defence Debate", *Security Challenges*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2013): 70-73.

¹³⁵ P. Dibb, "Managing Australia's Maritime Strategy in an Era of Austerity", in *Naval Diplomacy and Maritime Power Projection*, ed. A. Forbes (Canberra: Seapower Centre - Australia, 2013), 117-119; and K. Beazley, "Navies, Diplomacy and Power Projection 1983-96", in *Naval Diplomacy and Maritime Power Projection*, ed. A. Forbes (Canberra: Seapower Centre - Australia, 2013), 95-101.

¹³⁶ Payne, *2016 Defence White Paper*, 18, 39; and Richard Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers* (London: Croom Helm, 1996), 219. Additionally, Rear Admiral Richard Hill argues that for middle powers there is a difference between aspiration and reality, on the strategic stage. He contends that this creates vulnerabilities: overreach abroad, subsequently creating operational weakness at home.