



Chief of Navy Australia Speech

Indian Ocean Defence and Security Conference – Optus Stadium – 26 August 2022

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Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen.

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet today – the Nyoongar People – and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I would also like to pay my respects to the aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Men and Women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentleman it is great to be back in Western Australia.

35 years ago I joined my first warship – HMAS Swan – a destroyer escort based here at Fleet Base West. I was a 19 year old Seaman.

As I continued on my Navy journey it was here in 1994 I was awarded my Watchkeeping qualification in a guided missile frigate – in the waters off Fremantle. I was a proud 26-year-old Lieutenant. Which brings me to 1995 where I was awarded my submarine qualification in an Oberon Class submarine in the waters of Gage Roads – prior to celebrating with my shipmates in Fremantle.

Having served in submarines Collins, Waller, Sheean and Farncomb in the waters surrounding Western Australia, I have felt both privileged and humbled by the experience of serving our great country.

I have travelled from Esperance to Port Hedland, and trained in the seas from Albany to the Arafura, I have tested our submarine skills amongst the oil rigs of the NW Shelf, and against many unsuspecting merchant ships that ply the West Coast. My family and I have lived, learned and worked in Western Australia and consider it a second home having spent so many years here.

So, today 50 days into my term as Australia's Chief of Navy, it is great to be back in the West to talk to the theme of this important and inaugural conference.

The theme – *Beyond Transits – the emerging security relevance of the Indian Ocean* – invites a discussion that intellectually departs from the traditional discourse about Sea lanes.

I welcome this focus, because our economic wellbeing is derived from much more than just our import/export economy which almost exclusively relies on sea-based transport, and the relevance of the system on and under the Indian Ocean is of both National and Global significance.

We are now equally – and increasingly - reliant on our sovereign and Industry seabed infrastructure. Notably, there are 5 important cables that connect Western Australia with the global trading system. Another that connects WA to the East.

And our wellbeing is equally dependent on adherence to international laws and conventions that underpin the global trading system.

I invite you to reflect on the slide behind me – a work in progress, just like me. It is the only slide I will use today as I believe it speaks to the relevance of **all of** our surrounding seas, as well as the Indian Ocean – as I set the context for our Navy and our Nation today.

I will discuss what is changing; and what it means for all of us.

First, our maritime security context.

Australia – an island, trading nation – is entirely dependent on a peaceful, stable, maritime environment **to convey the instruments of our economic wellbeing** – our 2.3 trillion dollar economy.

We rely on import and export freedoms on the sea, and we are dependent on uninterrupted use of seabed cables to animate the financial and communications systems that connect us to the global trading system.

OUR VALUES

SERVICE
COURAGE
RESPECT
INTEGRITY
EXCELLENCE



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For Australia maritime trade is a source of national prosperity. It is what enables governments to provide hospitals and schools. It is what enables businesses to offer well paid and fulfilling employment. In short, maritime trade underpins the quality of life we enjoy.

Maritime trade plays the role it does because it is very efficient. It is efficient because of the safety and security of the maritime environment which is enabled by a shared global value for the safety of life at sea and for the rule of Law – be it Admiralty Law, International Law, Commercial Law, or the Regulations for Prevention of Collision at Sea. What we regularly refer to simply as the ‘rules-based order’ is actually a complex and sophisticated fabric of treaties and laws, all enabled by nations and organisations intent on behaving in a way that supports this rules-based order.

This good will and ‘good order at sea’ is important too for the security of communications – 99% of which passes through undersea cables – and for the fair use of marine resources which are crucial for many nations in the Indo Pacific.

For decades we have derived these freedoms and our national wellbeing gains from a status quo of almost universal acceptance of, and adherence to, the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea.

We all know that is no longer the case.

Freedoms in the maritime domain in the Indo Pacific can no longer be assumed. Sovereign ships and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace are being followed and harassed in contravention of established norms.

Competing claims of sovereignty over maritime features – including some with no legal basis for a sovereign claim – have been decided and enforced unilaterally.

And those nations who are reliant on these freedoms which have been eroded – nations from Western Europe to the Indo Pacific - are taking steps to update their insurance – and assurance – policies, by developing and acquiring increasingly potent military forces.

There is also greater uncertainty caused by the impact of climate change – more frequent and intense natural disasters and rising sea levels. The international system has also been rocked by impacts of the Covid pandemic – especially impacts on the movement of goods and people across international...and national...borders.

More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and consequent impact on global food supplies is a demonstration of two things.

One: that disregard for international law, for accepted norms of behaviour, has immediate and direct consequences for millions of people.

And two: millions of people affected are spread far beyond the theatre of war. Our globally connected maritime trading system operates for the benefit of us all.

But it is global, and disruptions have real world consequences that ripple across the entire system.

In summary, our economic well-being is dependent on ‘transit activity’ on and below our surrounding seas.

And we are also dependent on adherence to the international rules-based system to sustain the peaceful and prosperous use of the sea by all nations.

And adherence can no longer be assumed.

And neither can our economic wellbeing.

It is a truth that our economic wellbeing IS our most Vital National Interest.

In the context of Vital National Interest - that which cannot be assumed, must be assured.

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It enables our way of life and everything we value. And the principles, infrastructure and systems that underpin it must be protected and assured.

The change to our security environment is occurring despite our desires. This is not a change we, Australia, elicited or chose.

But it is one we must consciously contemplate and adjust to.

Against this backdrop the design, roles, employment and deployment of our Navy and Defence Forces are again coming into sharp relief.

This deterioration in the maritime security environment is now the catalyst for a re-evaluation of our Nation's ability to assure the operation of our trading system, to protect the vital instruments of our economic wellbeing, and to deter contemplation of threats to it.

And this is why our Nation is conducting a Strategic Defence Review – a review I welcome and support whole heartedly as we collectively contemplate the implications of our changing environment and the ways and means by which we will assure and insure our ongoing wellbeing as a Nation.

So, the world is changing. The centrality of our trading system and maritime capabilities to our economic well-being is coming into increasingly sharp relief, as uncertainty in the security environment increases.

And the importance of the Indian Ocean's role in assuring our economic wellbeing is increasing – as evidenced by our collective attendance at this conference and by the arteries and veins depicted on the slide behind me.

Finally, I submit that defence and protection of our vital infrastructure is but one role we must re-evaluate and optimise for.

We must also deliver capability to respond to threats in a manner that gives pause to potential aggressors. In the event that conversations between nations become violent, Nations must have partners and capability to disrupt and degrade the economic wellbeing of anyone who would threaten ours, because it is ultimately the nation that best sustains its economic wellbeing during conflict for the longest, that emerges the strongest.

But that is perhaps a topic for another day.

In closing I would like to thank Defence West and the Western Australian Government for arranging this important conference and their kind invitation for our Navy to play a role.

Thank you.