

SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE AUSTRALIA

ISSUE 8, SEPTEMBER 2003

AUSTRALIA'S MARITIME DEPENDENCE

An understanding of Australian strategic realities should begin with the acknowledgment that fundamentally Australia is a maritime nation. A maritime nation can be defined as a nation in which the maritime environment impacts extensively in the geographic, economic and strategic dimensions. As a maritime nation Australia is located in one of the most complex open ocean, littoral and archipelagic maritime regions in the world. Australia's regional neighbours are primarily archipelagic states and island groups. Almost all states in the wider region have long coastlines. In and around Indonesia, the Philippines and the South China Sea are situated the greatest cluster of significant straits in the world. Strategically, the Asia-Pacific region is central to Australia's security, and its geography affects all aspects of Australia's security policy.



In both geographical and political terms Australia is unique. This is because, unlike the other inhabited continents, it is an insular landmass, surrounded by seas that for the most part are empty of islands. It is the only continent to be occupied by a single State, making Australia by far the largest State in area in the world without a land border. By virtue of both these factors, Australia claims one of the largest maritime areas of all States, with an Exclusive Economic Zone. (EEZ) and continental shelf covering an area of 16 million square kilometres, including tropical islands and hazardous Antarctic waters. This increases to over 20 million square kilometres when the extended continental shelf and access to the resources of the seabed within this area are included. Australia is also responsible for the second largest maritime zone in the world, including a responsibility for maritime search and rescue, and the guidance of allied shipping in time of crisis.

When looking at the geographic features of the globe it is relevant that 70% of the earth's surface is covered by sea and over two-thirds of the world's population lives within 100 miles of the coast. This population figure is well over 95% for Australia itself, and is even higher for most of South-East Asia. Oceans provide access to nearly all parts of the globe, with 85% of states having a coastline.

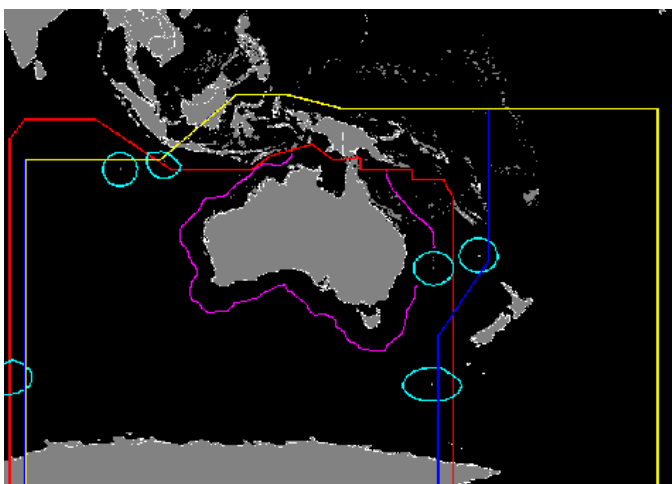
Professor Geoffrey Till notes that the increase in the world's population and living standards will increase the need for global movement of bulk cargoes. He also notes that the World Bank's current forecast is that by 2012 world seaborne trade will have doubled in terms of ton-miles and this trend will continue.¹ This is of direct relevance to Australia's maritime environment. Noting that Australia is a net exporter of energy, especially coal and raw materials such as iron ore, and a net importer of manufactured goods, it is of vital importance that a true understanding of the role of maritime strategy for Australia is pursued. The Australian economy is absolutely dependent on shipping. Globalisation has meant that Australia's economy is more integrated with other nations and less self-sufficient. Of our international trade, 99% by bulk and 73.5% by value is carried by ship,² with about 95% of that in foreign flagged vessels.

In acknowledging the vital role that air transport plays in supplementing seaborne trade, the role of the maritime environment is still relevant. This is because all trade which goes by air flies over the sea and is just as influenced by Australia's ability to control the sea, as is the overriding proportion which goes by sea. Without control of the maritime environment air services to Australia can also effectively be interdicted, and as a result Australia could be virtually isolated.

Trade is not the only issue that makes Australia a maritime nation. Other important areas that could be targeted by any adversary include tourism, employment and resources, especially offshore oil and gas installations and their supporting infrastructure. Employment and trade are intrinsically linked. One in five jobs in the city and one in four jobs in the country are directly related to the export of goods.³ Even low level threats against shipping at distance from Australia could have a deleterious impact on costs, which may severely damage Australia's trading position. These include fuel costs, insurance premiums and time constraints imposed by routing ships by other than the most direct route. Thus, Australian security requires a much broader focus than just conventional invasion through the northern sea-air gap.



Oceans governance is a significant issue. Australia is one of the most biologically diverse nations on earth and our marine environments are home to spectacular arrays of species, many of which are unique to Australian waters. In the southern temperate waters as many as 80% of species are endemic (not found elsewhere). In our northern waters, which are connected by currents to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, overall diversity is higher, although the proportion of endemic species only around 10%. Marine industries have excellent potential to contribute to future economic and employment growth. In particular, marine tourism and aquaculture can create new jobs in regional Australia. Australia also has extensive obligations under other ocean-related conventions and cooperative arrangements dealing with matters including shipping, meteorology, fisheries, biological diversity, pollution and the conservation of marine mammals (whales, dolphins and porpoises).



Australia's area of maritime responsibility

Maritime boundary delimitation gives one example of the importance of maritime issues to Australia. Australia has already negotiated a number of maritime delimitation agreements with other countries; specifically Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and France. The major outstanding delimitation that Australia has is with New Zealand, and negotiations on the maritime boundary are ongoing. The legal jurisdictions impacting on Australia also reflect its maritime dependence. Despite declarations by some countries seeking to limit military operations in EEZs,⁴ maritime forces may operate with few if any constraints. Activities are conducted in a non-discriminatory fashion, having due regard to the coastal states' rights with respect to fiscal, sanitary, immigration and economic issues.⁵ This underpins the importance to Australia of the maritime strategic concepts, such as sea control, and flowing from it the protection of sea lines of communications and power projection.

For Australia an important regional strategic issue is the impact of archipelagic sea lanes (ASL) legislation, especially in the cases of Indonesia and the Philippines. Conscious of its strategic and economic dependence on passage through the archipelagoes to its north, Australia has played a vital role in negotiations on this issue.

Notwithstanding this, an example of differing interpretations of maritime legal issues in the region that impact on neighbouring States is the case of Indonesia and their decision to designate three north-south ASLs through their archipelago.⁶

The maritime nature of the Australian environment has made it essential that Australia be able to conduct effective and successful maritime operations in support of its military strategy, especially within these regional areas. As Dr Eric Grove wrote, 'The use of the sea for movement is itself the core of maritime strategy. in its traditional sense.'⁷ Tradition in this sense is reality for an island nation in a region that is dominated so completely by the sea. The use of the sea for movement is the core issue facing Australia. Indeed, due to the overwhelmingly maritime nature of Australia's environment, any aggression against Australia, or any military action taken by the ADF in the region, will have a substantial, if not overwhelming, maritime component. In summary it could be argued that Australia stands alone among industrialised nations as the one most dependent on the sea and maritime power. As such, it behoves Australia to maintain an appropriate maritime strategy and associated defence capability to ensure our national interests are adequately protected.

Sea Power Centre Australia

Defence Establishment Fairbairn, CANBERRA ACT 2600

Director	CAPT Richard Menhinick	(02) 6287 6253
Editorial Officer	Mrs Kim Le	(02) 6287 6361
Facsimile		(02) 6287 6426

Naval History Section

Director of Naval History	Dr David Stevens	(02) 6266 2423
Facsimile		(02) 6266 2782

Research Section

Research Officer	LCDR Glenn Kerr	(02) 6287 6411
Facsimile		(02) 6287 6426

- ¹ Till, G. 'Maritime Trade Introduction,' Till, G. (ed), *Seapower at the Millenium*, Sutton Publishing Limited, UK, 2001, p. 177.
- ² Bureau of Transport & Regional Economics (BTRE), *Australian Transport Statistics – 2002*.
- ³ Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) *Fact Sheet: Why Trade Matters*, 22 Dec 02.
- ⁴ Such as Brazil, Cape Verde, India, Malaysia, Uruguay
- ⁵ Australian interpretation of 'due regard' is that it is the responsibility of the coastal state to inform maritime users of any resource issue that they should have due regard to in planning/conducting maritime operations in the EEZ of that coastal state.
- ⁶ Indonesian Regulation 37 of 2002, which concerned the rights and obligations of foreign ships and aircraft when exercising the right of archipelagic sea lanes passage through established archipelagic sea lanes, came into force on 28 December 2002.
- ⁷ Grove, E. *The Future of Sea Power*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, USA 1990, p. 12

