

# SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE AUSTRALIA

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## WHY THE ADF NEEDS MAJOR SURFACE COMBATANTS

Australia confronts uncertain threats from global terrorism and regional instability with a renewed emphasis on meeting trouble *before* it gets to our shores. There is consequently increased emphasis upon military engagement in the resolution of such crises. For this reason, and given the maritime nature of the Asia Pacific region, continued emphasis should be placed on maritime power, with significant implications for Australia's Navy.

The application of maritime power encompasses a wide range of operational situations from peacetime constabulary or benign activities to full hostilities in high intensity joint situations involving the projection of power. This includes applying naval diplomacy as a means of keeping the peace and thereby avoiding the actual use of the full range of their military capabilities.

Fundamental to the exercise of maritime power and use of



*Hypothetical future surface combatant*

the sea is the ability to gain and maintain sea control. Sea control may be defined as that condition which exists when one has freedom of action to use an area of sea for one's own purposes for a period of time and, if required, deny its use to an adversary. Importantly, sea control includes not only the sea surface, but also the air space above, the water and seabed below, and, particularly in a littoral environment, adjoining land areas. This is a critical capability for any maritime nation that seeks to preserve sovereignty over its resources, territories, right of free trade and interests, and is essential for the joint projection of power. Importantly, from a maritime perspective, implicit with sea control is control of the air above it. It is therefore, a joint responsibility. Without sea control Australia could not have fought in New Guinea in World War II and more recently, the ADF's operations in East Timor would not have been possible without the ability to sustain the force by sea and the attendant sea control required to achieve this. For the ADF to undertake most of the objectives envisioned by the Government, it will need to establish a

certain level of sea control in order for its operations to succeed.

In many senses the 'workhorses' of the fleet, major surface combatants, which include both destroyers with a strong air warfare bias and general-purpose frigates, are the vital means by which the Government exercises sea control and its use of the sea in close partnership with the Air Force. Surface combatants are multi-purpose vessels, uniquely capable of operating across the full spectrum of operations, with an emphasis on anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare, but with significant utility in many other areas.

Apart from their primary function of sea control, the surface combatant offers other unique capability options for Government. More specifically, the flexibility of surface combatants in rapid role change between different levels of operations and their ability to apply graduated force commensurate with the prevailing situation across a broad spectrum of operations, make them particularly versatile assets. They are the smallest surface units that are deployed autonomously for extended periods for military tasks, and their numbers and capabilities allow them individually to cover a wide range of military, constabulary and diplomatic tasks. They are particularly useful in establishing maritime presence. They are also versatile building blocks for larger national and coalition formations, essential defensive elements of task groups, and contributors of organic helicopters to a force.

Because warships operating outside the 12nm territorial sea of other countries do not challenge sovereignty in the way that land forces or over-flying air forces do, in some instances warships may be the preferred or only military diplomatic option available to the Australian Government. International legal regimes, such as the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention, allow for warships to linger indefinitely on station, providing ongoing presence and an immediate response to a developing situation. The influence of such presence devolves fundamentally from credible combat power, and the demonstration of military capabilities that can be used to reassure, impress or deter a foreign power. Surface combatants possess substantial combat power, enabling them to exercise a range of influences, from the benign to the coercive, without violating national sovereignty. This range of response makes them particularly useful tools in periods of uncertainty or crisis, providing the Australian Government with the maximum freedom of decision.

The utility of surface combatants in peacetime for policing, interdiction and boarding is considerable and Government



has often called upon these inherent capabilities. Examples include southern ocean fisheries law enforcement, remote ocean border protection, support to Government agencies in the board and seizure of ships involved in illegal trafficking of contraband, and regional peace keeping support. In the diplomatic role, surface combatants provide a powerful psychological impression through their perceptible presence while retaining the ability to continue action through to combat if necessary.

While each of these roles can and have been very effectively performed by Australia's surface combatant force, these types of activities cannot alone be allowed to determine the level of capability invested in new surface combatants. High intensity operations must remain the basic force determinant, for while advanced surface combatants can effectively contribute to the full spectrum of war fighting missions, the same assertion cannot be made for those ships tailored for the lower end of the spectrum. This is particularly relevant in an era of increasing violence when many of the military capabilities hitherto required for higher order contingencies, are becoming increasingly relevant in situations previously thought of as being constabulary in nature.

In higher intensity operations, surface combatants, which must be fully interoperable with our major allies, can be rapidly deployed and sustained for joint or combined operations wherever Australia's national or international interests demand. Surface combatants provide a significant contribution to littoral manoeuvre and land operations and are critical for the joint projection of power in other than benign circumstances. This includes both open ocean and littoral escort to ensure ground forces and their support reach their objective safely, force protection—including area air defence—in support of littoral operations, maritime command and control, fire support for forces ashore, special forces insertion, limited sea lift and support, and evacuation. During the 2003 Iraq conflict many of these capabilities were exercised by Australian surface combatants, which very effectively integrated with the multi-national maritime force.

In terms of evolving capability, surface combatants have undergone a significant transformation of their capabilities in recent years. While submarines still pose a threat to both merchant ships and naval vessels, the most significant threat comes from the air in the form of air attack and long-range air and surface launched anti-ship cruise missiles. Previous generations of destroyers and frigates carried mostly defensive weapons to screen higher-value ships such as aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and merchant vessels from attack. Today, surface combatants can still carry out those critical missions, but they are increasingly taking on new roles such as land-attack (using both missiles and extended range guided munitions) and theatre ballistic missile defence. With further improvement to their radars, combat systems and missiles, they will also likely play a key role in national or regional missile defence in the future.

In the future, Air Warfare capable Destroyers will seamlessly integrate with other ADF assets, including the Joint Strike Fighter and Airborne Early Warning and Control

aircraft (supported by Air to Air Refuelling aircraft), Over the Horizon Radar, Global Hawk, and land force capabilities (especially Ground Based Air Defence systems) to provide a pervasive, networked and continuous air defence umbrella for both maritime and joint littoral operations. This potent complementary joint capability will be critical in order to provide area air defence for an ADF task force deploying from Australian shores and establishing itself in some other place. Furthermore, an air warfare capable destroyer will provide a high level of air control, 24 hours a day, even in the absence of continuous aircraft support. This is particularly relevant given Australia's maritime geography and the extended ranges at which aircraft may be required to operate within our region. The Air Warfare Destroyer, while having a strong core air warfare bias, will not, however, only be used for air defence. Capable of operating at the highest end of the conflict spectrum, with their significant warfighting and maritime command and control capabilities, they will be Australia's primary sea control capability across the full spectrum of operations. Given their multi-role capability, the Air Warfare Destroyers could perhaps more appropriately be referred to as 'Sea Control Combatants.'

While the Air Warfare capable Destroyers will be critical in maintaining air control, particularly during times and in areas where aircraft are not continuously available, they are by no means the sole requirement to achieve sea control. A balanced surface combatant force is essential. The ANZAC Class frigates, which will complement the Air Warfare Destroyer, and which will be progressively updated to improve their self-defence capabilities, will equally need to be capable of working in the littoral environment as well as independently in the open ocean.

Maritime power is critical to Australia's national defence, given our enduring maritime geostrategic circumstances. Fundamental to the exercise of maritime power and use of the sea is the ability to gain and maintain sea control. Major surface combatants, as part of a balanced fleet, provide this critical capability in close partnership with the Army and Air Force. The modern surface combatant remains an adaptable, flexible and potent instrument for the Government to apply to ensure continuous use of the sea and whenever and wherever diplomatic and/or military effect is desired.

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