

RAN INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The combat capability provided by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) can be viewed as an insurance policy, both as a deterrent to aggression and as a form of protection in times of war or conflict. While maintenance of this combat capability is clearly the primary focus of ADF activity, the skills developed and maintained for combat operations provide the ADF with valuable utility across a wider diplomatic spectrum.

A key component of Australia's military strategy is shaping the strategic environment in order to minimise threats to Australian - and regional - interests. This requires effectively communicating our interests, objectives and intentions to others and engaging with the international community to undertake activities that support and reinforce those interests. The ADF's regional engagement role helps this process by building confidence, understanding and transparency between nations, while allowing our respective defence forces to work together to achieve common security goals.

Within the ADF, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) provides the Government with a valuable range of options to support engagement with other nations on a regular basis and to help shape our strategic environment. The unique attributes of maritime forces are well detailed in the RAN's maritime doctrine, and these attributes - particularly flexibility, adaptability, reach, poise and persistence - mean that warships are very well suited for engaging with regional neighbours in a variety of constructive ways.¹ By their very nature, naval vessels operate overseas, conduct port visits and regularly interact with the militaries of other countries. In doing so they are constantly shaping the way the RAN, ADF and Australia is viewed by those countries.

The RAN conducts its international engagement at three broad levels: strategic, operational and tactical. At the strategic level, the Chief of Navy conducts 'Counterpart Visits' with other navy chiefs. These visits provide a forum for one-on-one discussions and the chance to build a personal rapport. They allow each service chief to brief his own government on regional concerns and to gain a first-hand appreciation of how other countries might react to particular events. Moreover, with the mutual trust gained from these talks the service chiefs are better placed to deal with each other in times of crisis.

The Chief of Navy also hosts a range of international symposia and activities, most prominently the biennial RAN Sea Power Conference, held as part of the biennial Pacific Maritime Congress and Exposition. He also attends similar overseas events, notably the International Seapower Symposium (a biennial forum for world navies hosted by the USN);² the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) which aims to promote naval professionalism, maritime understanding and naval cooperation in the western Pacific region;³ and the recently instigated Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, a consultative forum for the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Rim to discuss maritime security issues.⁴ Such

forums have proved extremely useful in both standardising procedures between navies and, importantly, setting the tone for overall relations between them.

Also at the strategic level, formal 'Navy to Navy' talks are undertaken at the one/two star level, where a range of issues of mutual concern are discussed and the interaction objectives for our navies are developed. These discussions tend to focus on broader strategic, organisational, managerial, personnel, training and operational issues. The RAN currently undertakes formal 'Navy to Navy' talks with 12 countries: Canada, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand (NZ), the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). The number of such talks has grown significantly in recent years and modest increases are expected.

At the operational level of engagement the RAN is regularly involved in a large number of international exercises and operations, often including reciprocal visits between the Fleet Commander and his counterparts.⁵ These activities are critical to the development and maintenance of mariner and interoperability skills, along with practicing the combined command and control arrangements necessary to operate in effective coalitions. As well as promoting technical proficiency, international exercises help in shaping our strategic environment and building trust and confidence between participants. Some examples of key RAN exercises are outlined below.

RIMPAC. The RAN is a regular participant in the RIMPAC exercise series held bi-annually off Hawaii. RIMPAC is among the largest multinational naval exercises in the world and provides valuable opportunities for the RAN to work with other major naval powers that border the Pacific Ocean (although interest is increasingly shown from nations further afield). The exercise practices high-end warfare and command and control skills, using advanced weapons ranges to record and analyse performance. Australia is one of only three countries that has participated in every RIMPAC exercise since its inception in 1971 - the others being the US and Canada. RIMPAC 2008 has ten participating countries: US, UK, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Chile, Peru, Singapore, and the Netherlands - with a number of other nations sending observers.

TALISMAN SABRE. This is a biennial exercise involving Australia and US forces, held off the Northern Territory and Queensland coasts, and aimed at honing crisis action planning and high end warfighting skills. In terms of Australian participation TALISMAN SABRE is the largest exercise the ADF conducts with over 8,000 ADF personnel participating in 2007.

BERSAMA PADU/LIMA. The defence forces of the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and NZ regularly exercise under the auspices of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in a series known as BERSAMA LIMA or BERSAMA PADU, depending on the year. The series is a joint and combined multi-threat exercise and

was originally aimed at the defence of peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, but has evolved to include defence against a range of mutual maritime threats, such as piracy and protection of vital sea lines of communication.

While these examples are large exercises involving multi-threat operations, the RAN also participates in a wide range of smaller exercises targeting specific skill sets. For example a number of diving and mine warfare exercises have been held under the auspices of the WPNS. Due to the non-offensive nature of mine countermeasures exercises, and the fact that they are aimed at a common threat, these activities are particularly well suited to bringing regional countries together.

These examples are indicative, but demonstrate that the scope and capabilities practiced in each exercise can vary considerably and help shape our environment in different ways. Some focus on basic seamanship and surveillance tasks, while at the other end of the spectrum RIMPAC and TALISMAN SABRE hone the high level warfighting skills and associated interoperability. However the underlying intent of each, in addition to practicing the technical skill sets appropriate to the exercise, is to establish and maintain all-important confidence, mutual understanding, transparency and capacity building between participants.

In addition to military exercises the RAN has also sponsored some very successful engagement programs aimed at building regional maritime capacity. One outstanding success has been the Pacific Patrol Boat program which was detailed in Semaphore 2 of 2005.⁶ This program did not simply deliver patrol boats to Pacific Island nations, but provided ongoing logistic support and crew training. Even today, the RAN maintains operational and technical advisors in each of the recipient countries to assist with operation and maintenance of these vessels, as part of an increasingly cooperative regional network of national surveillance and enforcement capabilities.

The lowest, 'tactical', level of engagement occurs in a number of ways. A passage exercise (PASSEX) occurs when warships transit an area and take the opportunity to exercise with adjacent naval forces. Often conducted at short notice and on an opportunity basis, they are usually restricted to navigation, seamanship and low level warfare activities. Being relatively simple and short, they can be organised with little lead time and optimise benefits of participating elements being in the same area at the same time.

Vital engagement also occurs with every overseas visit by a warship. The RAN conducts frequent port visits to most regional countries and maintains a deployment program that ensures a visible presence further afield at regular intervals. The aims of these visits are many, but importantly they 'show the flag', demonstrating the Australian Government's friendship with the country visited, and allowing a direct interaction between our nations. They provide an opportunity for locals to visit the ship and talk to the sailors. Equally importantly, they allow our officers and sailors to gain a first-hand appreciation of the country visited; a critical factor in building mutual understanding and respect.

Routine activities such as Open Days, Receptions and industry sea days all help promote Australian interests and shape the way Australia is seen in the country visited. Indeed, for many foreign nationals, their only direct interaction with Australians may be the sailors on a visiting RAN ship. In this sense, every deployed member of the RAN is an ambassador for Australia. While not deployed specifically for the purpose, RAN ships can also provide a platform to showcase Australian industry overseas. Such activities all play a part in promoting Australia and shaping how our nation is perceived.

While the most visible aspect of the RAN's regional engagement involves ship visits and exercises, there are other interactions that also promote capacity building, understanding and cooperation between nations. The provision of training, exchange officers and reciprocal attendance at staff courses are all key components of building understanding and trust. Australia provides 'individual training' where foreign personnel attend courses in Australia and RAN personnel do likewise overseas. The RAN also hosts 'operational training' where foreign personnel are attached to our ships. Over 200 foreign naval personnel train in Australia each year, with most coming from regional countries. Importantly many senior officers from regional countries have undertaken training in Australia and the personal contacts they have gained can assist when dealing with sensitive issues.

The diplomatic role is one that navies across the world have engaged in for centuries. The attributes of maritime forces make RAN ships - large and small - ideally suited to visit and engage with regional countries to promote Australia's security and national interests as a normal part of their operational activity. This engagement helps build practical skills together with mutual understanding and respect, and remains a key component of shaping our strategic environment.

¹ These are explained in detail in Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Sea Power Centre – Australia, Canberra, 2000, pp 48-51

² The International Seapower Symposium is arguably the world's major gathering of senior navy leaders, often hosting 40-50 chiefs of navy. The last symposium was in October 2007.

³ See Andrew Forbes, 'The Western Pacific Naval Symposium' in Andrew Forbes and Michelle Lovi (eds), *Australian Maritime Issues 2006: SPC-A Annual*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No. 19, Sea Power Centre – Australia, Canberra, 2007, pp.183-188.

⁴ The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium was inaugurated on 15 February 2008 in New Delhi, see www.indiannavy.gov.in/ion.htm.

⁵ Details of some key RAN exercises will be covered in a future Semaphore.

⁶ 'See Steven Bell, 'The Pacific Patrol Boat Project', in Gregory P Gilbert and Robert J Daviit, *Australian Maritime Issues 2005: SPC-A Annual*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No. 16, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2005, pp. 95-98.

