



MARITIME TRADE OPERATIONS TEAM 1 – A CONTEMPORARY CAPABILITY

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“Seaborne commerce & naval power are meshed together: merchant vessels provide the business of the sea, and naval vessels provide the security of the seas. For that reason...navies are...a key and inevitable component of trade security”

Vice Admiral Tim Barrett. The Navy and the Nation (2017)

Introduction

Australia is a maritime nation reliant on trade. Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) directly affect our economy, our resources and our concomitant ability to field and sustain a credible maritime deterrent. The traditional definition of SLOC is defined by merchant shipping transiting along established trade routes, however a new line of thought is that SLOC also reflects ‘sea lines of commerce’ including not only merchant ships, but submarine cables laid across the seas that are also fundamental to our national security and economic prosperity. One of the Navy’s fundamental roles is to ensure Freedom of Navigation (FoN) along Australia’s SLOC. As presently demonstrated in the Straits of Hormuz, if an antagonist disrupts commercial shipping, the Navy is called upon to minimise the strategic impact by deploying a presence in the form of a deterrent, a form of sea denial. However, the size of our Navy likely precludes sea control due to our vast maritime geography.

In terms of trade, 99 per cent of our international trade is transported by ship whilst Australian ports manage 10 per cent of the world’s sea trade. 56 per cent of the world’s iron ore and 30 per cent of the world’s coal was exported from Australian ports in 2018. In other commodities, 25 million 20-foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) containers transited the Europe-Asia-Europe trade routes through the South China Sea.¹ These trade routes intersect with Australia’s SLOC or pass through Australia’s strategic areas of interest. The task of protecting the shipping plying these waters, whether they be Australian flagged vessels or not, is a core function of the Navy.² Maritime Trade Operations (MTO) is a contemporary capability specifically designed to engage with maritime industry, coordinate operations involving maritime commercial interests and protect merchant shipping.

Political Risk

Politically driven changes in our strategic environment creates instability. The South China Sea, a key commercial shipping route connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, is now a source of tension between nation states; in particular the US and China. China is also in dispute with a number of Asian countries claiming sovereignty over different areas of the South China Sea. Maritime industry is not immune to political risk playing out in cyber space. Belligerent nation states look to target critical infrastructure, including ports, maritime logistics and shipping. For example, the 2017 ‘NotPetya’ contagious malware outbreak, attributed by the US to Russia, crippled information technology systems at Maersk, disrupting its port terminals and container operations. Twenty vessels were also impacted by a GPS spoofing³ attack in the Black Sea during tensions in the Crimea, whilst ships in the Middle East have reported similar incidents.

Political rivalries and conflicts are being played out on the seas.⁴ With the territorial boundaries of nations closely adjacent to choke points such as in the Straits of Hormuz, or in high-density SLOC transiting archipelagic choke points such as the Malacca Straits, GPS spoofing could cause catastrophic navigational and political outcomes. Based on the current events in the South China Sea and the extended nature of our SLOC throughout South East Asia, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, it is reasonable to accept that Australia will face a range of maritime security risks, driven by political risk, in the future.

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Maritime Trade Operations Team 1

Over the last 25 years the Navy has conducted operations from low-level humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and maritime interdiction operations e.g. counter-piracy, narcotics and human trafficking, to high-end joint warfare in the Persian Gulf. These operations have all intersected Australia's SLOCs, which convey Australia's oil, consumer goods and food imports, and our exports such as iron ore, coal and cattle. One of the critical imports to Australia is phosphates. Imports of phosphate fertiliser have increasing at around 14 per cent per year to 1 million tonnes, almost entirely as ammonium phosphates.⁵ If we drill down a little further, without the free movement of merchant shipping along our established SLOCs the ADF cannot effectively sustain its own operations. An obvious example of this is the potential impact on, and vulnerability of, Australia's strategic fuel reserves. In this context, the reliance on externally refined fuel resources and the global nature of Australia's sea trade generates a priority military requirement to protect Australia's SLOCs.

Whether our Navy is involved in benign operations or we deploy task groups in kinetic environments, nearly every operation will interact with, or affect merchant shipping. Maritime Trade Operations Team 1 (MTOT1) is the Navy's primary Civil-Military (CIVMIL) specialist in this environment and it provides an organic link to maritime industry and merchant shipping. MTOT1 understands, and can move seamlessly, within this environment. It is a wholly Naval Reserve capability whose primary purpose is to coordinate naval operations with maritime industry and merchant shipping, in order to support military operations.

A Contemporary Capability

The Navy Warfighting Strategy 2018 states the 'Navy will generate and deploy self-supported and sustainable task groups, supported by specialist teams, capable of achieving the full spectrum of maritime tasks.' MTOT1 is a specialist team that can deliver a particular effect to support a key maritime task; maritime trade protection:

MTO's mission is to provide effective support to the ADF and maritime industry through civilian-military liaison, cooperation, coordination, guidance, advice, assistance and, where necessary, positive naval supervision of ports and shipping, to support maritime military operations.

MTO effects are scalable. MTOT1 has the ability to deliver a series of graduated actions in response to an escalating or evolving threat. At the 'left of arc' is the low-level contingency environment where MTOT1's Port Liaison Officers (PLOs) leverage relationships with maritime industry locally to facilitate military operations. Moving along this arc to broader national or international tasking, MTOT1 provides specialists to the Maritime Component Command Element (MCCE), Combined Forces Maritime Component Command (CFMCC), or deploys the MTO Element (MTOE) as a Task Element and force multiplier. At the extreme 'right of arc' is a national response to an existential threat. In these circumstances, MTOT1 is a critical enabler to the success of maritime mobilisation. Mobilisation requires timely and coordinated decisions across the Whole of Government geo-political-economic-security spectrum. In the maritime domain, MTO supports the movement of industrial goods and energy, requisitioning, crewing and chartering and most importantly, the protection of merchant shipping and surety of supply.

Better Military Decision Making

In the joint environment, operational commanders are required to take into account factors other than those purely military in character when planning and conducting operations. One of the most significant of these factors is the presence of merchant ships.⁶ MTO enables the military commander to shorten the decision making-taking time in planning and executing operations for the protection of shipping. MTO is therefore a critical factor in coordinating and deconflicting merchant shipping with naval operations, or taking positive control of the commercial maritime environment in, or adjacent to the area of operations.

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Merchant ships use economical routing techniques (allowing for transit route, speed of advance, cabotage, insurance, port costs, flag registration, crew sustainment and wages and entitlements) to move commodities along SLOC. The requirement for a merchant ship to divert from an established voyage plan increases the cost of the voyage in proportion to the profit margin on the commodity carried. Diversion can make a voyage unviable. MTOT1 provides rapid advice to commercial operators and ship's masters on threat areas or navigational hazards during maritime operations. Such advice allows shipping companies to plan early and confidently to minimise the potential economic impact of a diversion. MTOT1's engagement ensures maritime industry can make their own risk assessments on routing based on releasable and up-to-date military information and their own economic and other risk drivers.

During recent Exercises KAKADU and OCEAN EXPLORER, MTOT1 was able to imbed with local VTS and port operators and work with maritime industry to deconflict military and commercial operations. Integrating with civilian authorities minimised diversions, potential embarrassment and delays to exercise serials. Recent experience in multinational operations and exercises also demonstrates MTOT1 can provide a suite of operational and tactical level effects in support of a joint campaign. Such effects include:

- a. acting as a central point for merchant shipping coordination
- b. establishing MTO areas to manage the maritime environment adjacent to operations or along SLOC
- c. maintaining maritime domain situation awareness and understanding by compiling the daily merchant shipping picture and advising commanders
- d. monitoring and reporting the flow of shipping into key ports and through key choke points or managing a focused neighbourhood watch or coast watching organisation
- e. briefing merchant masters and working with industry to deconflict or route merchant shipping away from risks
- f. tracking adversary flagged merchant vessels to assist in determining if these vessels are engaged in belligerent acts or supporting hostile forces.
- g. managing the entry of non-government agency shipping and other-government agency shipping into ports for civilian relief and humanitarian assistance
- h. conducting Rapid Port Assessments on the status of ports and harbours and providing naval harbour masters to work with civilian infrastructure to restore services.

An Experienced Capability

Today's MTO officer has a complex and specialised role to play in 'a thinking Navy, a fighting Navy, an Australian Navy.'⁷ MTO supports military commanders to set the conditions for success in a broad spectrum of maritime operations from maintenance of FoN, to task force oriented operations, to recovery and stabilisation. MTO officers have deployed on OPs WARDEN (East Timor), BELISI II (Bougainville) and CATALYST (Iraq). From 2009 onwards, MTO has deployed in support of combined operations with UKMTO in OPs SLIPPER and MANITOU. During OP APEC ASSIST, MTO officers deployed as part of Fleet Battle Staff. The deployment brought a tangible network and a comprehensive knowledge of maritime industry to planning and operations providing a way to champion military priorities in the ports and harbours under PNG (national) control. Thus, the MTO capability has developed its doctrine and personnel to be able to directly support joint and combined operations. Consequently, as of October 2019, Australian MTO officers are imbedded in the UK Maritime Component Command (MCC) of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) executing shipping protection operations in the Straits of Hormuz.

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Conclusion

A critical foundation of a maritime strategy is a deep understanding of maritime economics. Australia's maritime economy, now more than ever, is crucial to our national prosperity and security. Most, if not all, maritime military operations will affect maritime industry and merchant shipping in some way. As an island nation, this interaction is inevitable.

MTOT1 is a contemporary capability, an experienced capability and an enduring capability to support the war fighter. Given its CIVMIL role, MTOT1 presents a unique enabler by providing the Navy with a means to engage maritime industry, provide better decision making and to deliver effects at all levels of maritime operations. Keeping MTO foremost in the deliberate planning process and in the mind of the planner as a warfare enabler is fundamental to executing better maritime operations. Utilising MTOT1's capability fully during maritime operations means the Navy positioned to ensure FoN and merchant ships are effectively protected, therefore assuring the integrity of Australian SLOC and thus Australia's security and economic prosperity.

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RAN Maritime Trade Operations Team 1

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Note about the Author:

Commander Mark Linden, CSM joined the RAN in 1979, is an advanced qualified MTO officer and MWO. His sea postings include *HMA Ships Melbourne, Vampire, Curlew, Rushcutter* and command in MSAs *Salvatore-V, Koraaga, Carole-S, Wallaroo* and the TRV *Trevally*. Mark's operational deployments include OPs BELISI II (2000), CATALYST (2006-7) and MANITOU (2014-15). He is a RANSAC graduate and holds an Executive Masters of Business from the Queensland University of technology.

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Maritime Trade Operations Concept of Operations (MTO CONOPS), Canberra, August 2019,

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Fleet Warfighting Plan 2022, Canberra, © Commonwealth.

Further reading: The MTO Doctrine and the MTO Concept of Operations are available on the Fleet Command/ COMFLOT/MTO DPN Intranet site.

¹ United Nations Conference on Trade Development, *Review of Maritime Transport 2018*, ISBN 978-92-1-112928-1 United Nations 2018, pg.12,14

² Maritime Trade Operations Team 1 - Concept of Operations July 2019, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, pg3.

³ GPS spoofing is the use of a radio transmitter to interfere with a legitimate GPS signals

⁴ <https://www.agcs.allianz.com/news-and-insights/expert-risk-articles/shipping-security-political-risk-threat-continues-to-evolve.html>, accessed 25 August 2019

⁵ <http://www.chemlink.com.au/phosphat.htm>, accessed 17 October 2019

⁶ Director General International Military Staff NATO (2015) MC 0376/3 Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping, IMSWM- 0295- 2015 (NATO Unclassified) of 15 July 2015

⁷ Plan Pelorus: Navy Strategy 2022. The Chief of Navy's intent. "We live in an increasing complex geo-political environment, within a dynamic Indo-Pacific region. The maritime domain is central to the security and prosperity of our Nation...the future is increasingly unpredictable."

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