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ANZAM and Australia's Increasing Defence Responsibilities in the Post-war Asia-Pacific

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Introduction

In a series of meetings convened over 1949–50, the governments of Australia, Britain and New Zealand negotiated the Australia-New Zealand-Malaya arrangement (ANZAM). The purpose of those meetings was to agree on a new area of strategic responsibility for the governments involved and establish service-level machinery for trilateral strategic planning in that area.

ANZAM was to lack the status of other post-war regional defence arrangements such as ANZUS and SEATO – indeed, Peter Edwards and Gregory Pemberton observe that even during the years it was operational “the term ANZAM was seldom heard in public.”¹ Granted, infrequent references to ANZAM can be found in existing scholarly literature, particularly in relation to the creation of the Commonwealth Far Eastern Strategic Reserve (FESR).² However, nowhere is there a study that traces the origins and evolution of ANZAM and, importantly, how it relates to Australia’s increasing responsibilities in the maritime domain.

This paper presents such an account. In doing so, it finds that ANZAM signified Australia’s increasing appetite for greater responsibilities in the defence of its immediate region and was a valuable tool for incorporating the nation’s distinct interests within Commonwealth defence planning. Moreover, as the impetus for the Radford-Collins Agreement and the FESR,

¹ Peter Edwards and Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1965* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 171.

² See, David Lee, *The Search for Security: The Political Economy of Australia’s Postwar Foreign and Defence Policy* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 81, 122-3, 127-34; 1-41 Hiroyuki Umetsu, “The Origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve: The UK Proposal to Revitalise ANZAM and the increased Australian Defence Commitment to Malaya,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 50, no. 4 (2004): 509-525; Jeffrey Grey, *Up Top: The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian Conflicts, 1955-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 1-43.



ANZAM was a foundational measure in the formalisation of Australia's commitment to inter-naval cooperation and regional defence in the post-war world.

The Wartime Origins of ANZAM

To better appreciate the genesis and development of ANZAM and its relationship to Australia's increasing naval responsibilities in its immediate region of strategic interest, it is useful to briefly examine the difficult lessons learnt in the course of the Second World War and the ideas this sparked within policymaking and strategic circles. The experiences of the war – in particular, the fall of Singapore and Malaya, which had left Australia facing an unprecedented threat in the region – highlighted Australia's geographic isolation, the weakness of the existing systems for imperial communication and policymaking, and, most critically, Britain's contracting military power. However, Australia was not in a position to defend itself alone. Moreover, despite Britain's diminishing capabilities, deep cultural, political and economic links still tethered Australia firmly to Britain and the Commonwealth. The solution then was a more cooperative Commonwealth security arrangement, leveraging the utility of the Commonwealth connection while ensuring Australia could take on a greater role in matters of regional defence. Prime Minister John Curtin led the call for such an arrangement in his concept of the Fourth Empire. This was conceived as the next evolutionary stage of the British Commonwealth, wherein "full and continued consultation" would see the disparate perspectives of the Commonwealth united and, in turn, the development of a coordinated response to world affairs.³

The regionalisation of defence and Australia's desire to be treated as a principal power in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific were key to Curtin's Fourth Empire. At the 1944 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, Curtin tabled a memorandum "Improvements in the Machinery for Empire Co-operation desired by the Australian Government", which stressed the importance of coordinating defence policies and high-level planning. The memorandum also raised the idea of regional zones of responsibility, concluding:

"The defence of the south west Pacific must be made stronger than in the past ... While Australia is quite ready to play its part in a world organization along the lines mentioned, it is nevertheless a fact of current experience that when the peace of the

³ "Imperial Team Work," *The Age* (Melbourne), 16 August 1943, 3; 7 September 1943, 5; Doc. 272 Press Statement, 6 September 1943, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–1949* Vol. 6: July 1942–December 1943, ed. R.G. Neale (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1983).



Pacific is broken Australia's war effort must be concentrated in that area. In the opinion of the Australian Government it is essential that the plans should exist between the parts of the Empire concerned and also between the other nations concerned for their co-operation for mutual defence in the strategical area which I have outlined. The Australian people have recently faced the stark realism of a perilous situation. They are determined that everything possible shall be done to prevent a recurrence of a similar danger.”⁴

It must be noted that the concept of regional zones of responsibility was also being concurrently raised by the Minister for External Affairs H.V. Evatt and the Defence Committee.⁵ If adopted, Curtin believed that the Fourth Empire and its defence aspects would “ensure Australia’s development as a world Power with a dominating influence in the Pacific.”⁶ Curtin’s Fourth Empire sought to facilitate adequate planning existed for the defence of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific and to codify Australia’s regional responsibilities, in turn, removing some of the strain on Britain to manage its global interests.

Joint Planning and the Regionalisation of Commonwealth Defence

While Curtin’s Fourth Empire proposal was ultimately unsuccessful – fellow Dominion Canada, rejected the concept of common policy as regressive – David Lee has observed that the Chifley government’s defence policy “took up where Curtin left off”.⁷ At the 1946 Prime Ministers’ Conference in London, Prime Minister Ben Chifley expressed his government’s view that “each member of the British Commonwealth should assume the main responsibility for joint planning within its own regional area.”⁸ This included greater cooperation in high-level strategic planning and the regionalisation of defence. For Australia, its area of

⁴ Memorandum, “Improvements in the Machinery for Empire Co-operation desired by the Australian Government,” Fourteenth Meeting of Prime Ministers, 15 May 1944, TNA: CAB 99/28.

⁵ See, Honae Cuffe, “‘A Right to Speak’: The 1944 Australia-New Zealand Agreement and the Case for Closer Commonwealth Defence Cooperation,” UNSW Canberra, Conflict and Society Seminar, 30 April 2019,

https://www.academia.edu/39001427/A_right_to_speak_the_1944_Australia_New_Zealand_Agreement_and_the_case_for_closer_Commonwealth_defence_cooperation.

⁶ “Empire Council Explained,” *Army News* (Darwin), 13 September 1943, 4.

⁷ David Lee, “Britain and Australia’s Defence Policy, 1945–49,” *War and Society* 13, no. 1 (1995): 61.

⁸ Doc. 210 Minutes of Fourth Meeting of Prime Ministers, 25 April 1946, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–49* Vol. 9: January–June 1946, eds. W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991) (hereafter *DAFP* Vol. 9).



responsibility would be Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, managed in cooperation with New Zealand and Britain.⁹ Chifley envisioned a system in which Australian defence machinery would manage the control and maintenance of Commonwealth forces deployed in the region.¹⁰ The leaders present endorsed this concept and upon his return Chifley spoke in parliament of Australia's commitment to making a larger contribution to Commonwealth defence.¹¹ Despite this show of support, no definite next-steps to establish a revised machinery for Commonwealth defence had actually been agreed upon.

In the early months of 1947, Australian policymakers took it upon themselves to initiate the development of new machinery with a major review of Australia's strategic position and subsequent five-year defence plan. The review considered Australia's defence needs in the event of a global war and promoted the regionalisation of Commonwealth defence planning as the best system for security.¹² Within this system, Australia would assume the role of the "main support area" for Southeast Asia and the South Pacific – "the strategic region of which it is the heart" – and the nation would accordingly act "behalf of the rest of the British Commonwealth in External Affairs matters relating to the Pacific."¹³

Both the review and defence plan informed Australia's performance at the 1948 Prime Ministers' Conference. Evatt acted as Australia's representative and chief among his aims was determining the "essential measures required ... to allow Commonwealth countries to integrate successfully in the event of war", including high-level strategic planning, chains of command and areas of responsibility.¹⁴ The British delegation tabled a memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff (COS) which reaffirmed the nation's commitment to a coordinated and regionalised Commonwealth defence machinery. Before this machinery could be realised, it

⁹ Doc. 206 Minutes First Meeting of Prime Ministers, 23 April 1946, *DAFP* Vol. 9; Doc. 208 Minutes Third Meeting of Prime Ministers, 24 April 1946, *DAFP* Vol. 9.

¹⁰ Doc. 200 Statement submitted by Chifley to Prime Ministers' Conference, 20 April 1943, *DAFP* Vol. 9.

¹¹ 19 June 1947, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives* No. 25 1946 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1946).

¹² This defence plan was announced by Defence Minister John Dedman in June 1947. 4 June 1947, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives* No. 23 1947 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1947).

¹³ Doc. 163 Council of Defence Meeting, 12 March 1947, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–49* Vol. 12: Australia and the Postwar World 1947, eds. W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995) (hereafter *DAFP* Vol. 12).

¹⁴ Allan Boase, Defence Advisor 1948 Prime Ministers' Conference, to Frederick Shedden, Secretary Department of Defence, 27 September 1948, NAA: A816, 14/301/351.



was necessary for all members to come to an agreement on long-term threats, the fundamental objective of defence policy and strategy, and the distribution of effort in line with regions of strategic responsibility.¹⁵ Britain assessed that the Soviet Union posed the greatest risk to world security. The proposed response was to seek a commitment from Australia to contribute to the defence of the Middle East, allowing Britain to give greater focus to Western Europe and the Atlantic. Australia agreed that military planning should be based on the assumption of war with the Soviets, yet threats in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific could not be dismissed, and when it came to the question of the regionalisation of defence, this was the area Australia was committed to. Despite these discrepancies, the Australian Defence Committee recommended the institution of joint strategic planning on a regional basis – the hope was that a suitable arrangement could be reached in due course through negotiation.¹⁶ It was on the basis of this joint strategic planning that ANZAM was established.

ANZAM, the Radford-Collins Agreement and the Increasing Profile of the Royal Australian Navy

Negotiated in a series of inter-government meetings throughout 1949–50, ANZAM was initially conceived as a service-level arrangement for command and coordination in the event of war in the area. The ANZAM area encompassed Australia, New Zealand and the Malayan Peninsular, and the surrounding waters and islands. The three countries agreed that “regional defence planning can most effectively be undertaken by the existing Australian Higher Defence machinery”. In practice, this meant that within the ANZAM area, Australia was responsible for home defence and the defence of its territories, planning in the event of conflict – taking into consideration resource availability, strategic infrastructure and the mobilisation of forces – as well as the control of the sea lines of communication.¹⁷ New Zealand was responsible for managing home defence, and Britain was responsible for Malaya. Although Australia was to lead planning for the area, the ANZAM machinery was to be premised on “the basis of equality and an effective voice”, with British and New Zealand

¹⁵ “Commonwealth Defence Co-operation,” Memorandum by British Chiefs of Staff, Prime Ministers’ Conference, 23 September 1948, NAA: A816, 14/301/351.

¹⁶ The World Situation and its Defence Aspects, Review by Defence Committee of United Kingdom Paper PMM (48)1, 11 November 1948, NAA: A816, 14/301/351; David Lee, *The Search for Security*, 95.

¹⁷ For early ANZAM war planning see, Guide to the Preparation of Logistic War Plans for Anzam Area Commands, Australian Plans Division, 1955, SPC-A.



liaison officers stationed in Australia to facilitate regular consultation. In the event of war, the execution of Australia's planning would become the collective operational responsibility of the three nations, managed through the ANZAM COS, which would function through Australia's defence machinery.¹⁸

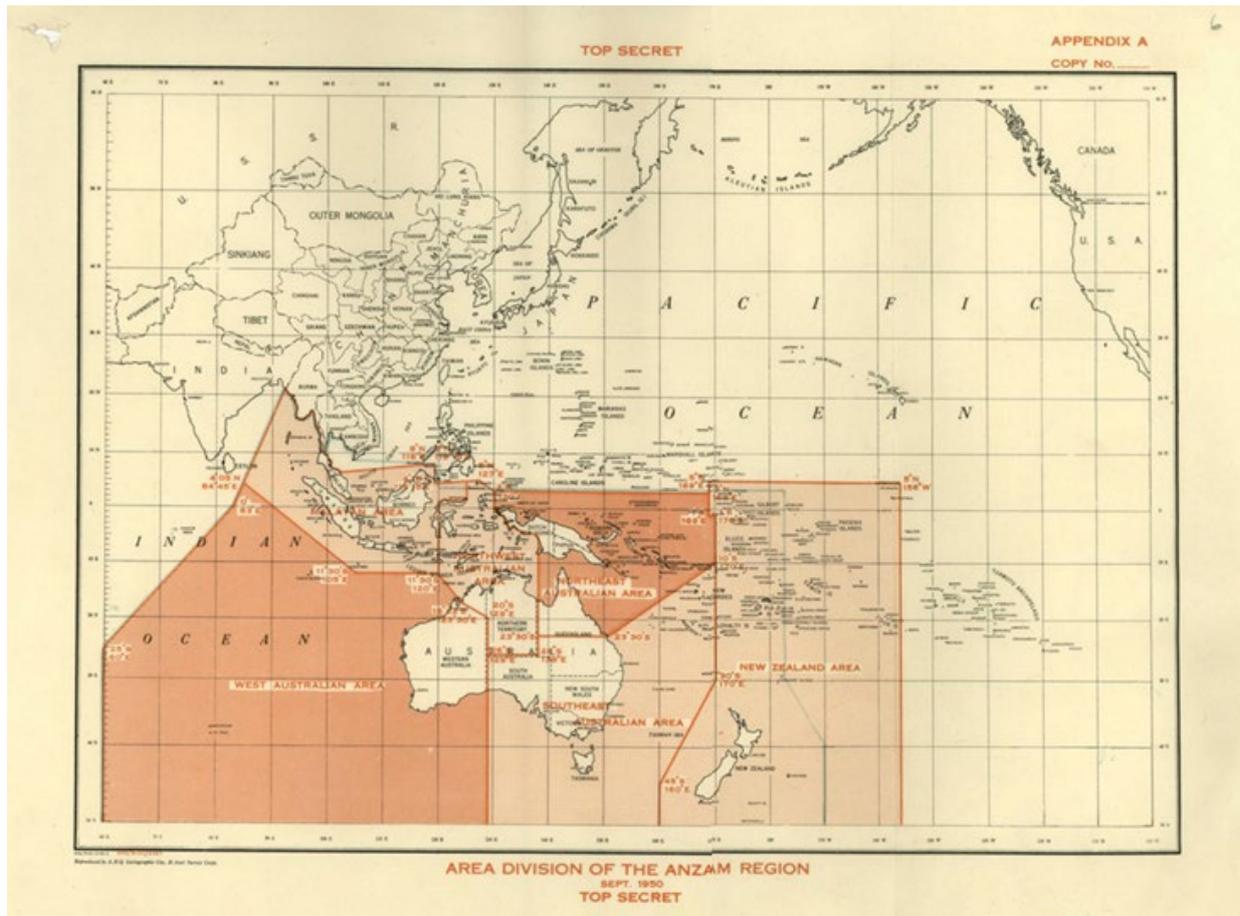
As the Australian government increasingly focused on regional defence, the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) operational planning came to be framed within this context. Australia's new responsibility for sea lines of communication reflected earlier appraisals of the absolute importance of such in relation to both national and regional security. For instance, in early 1944, a Defence Committee report on the future security considerations for Southeast Asia and the South Pacific had noted that it was only through the control or monitoring of this arc of islands and surrounding waters that Australia could protect against the possibility of invasion and ensure the arrival of reinforcements and supplies in the event of conflict. "The best assurance of its [the region] security", the report concluded, "would be a scheme of Imperial defence formulated and carried out by the members of the British Commonwealth in co-operation."¹⁹ ANZAM ultimately met this need allocating to the RAN the regional

¹⁸ "Procedure for Future Planning in Relation to British Commonwealth Defence in ANZAM Area," Defence Committee Report, revised copy following Joint Planning discussions, 26 August 1949, NAA: A5954, 1626/4; Appendix, "Proposals for the Setting up of Joint Australian, New Zealand and United Kingdom Service Planning Machinery for Co-ordinating the Defence of Australia, New Zealand and the Territories in South East Asia Where the United Kingdom has Responsibilities," Chiefs of Staff Committee, 17 February 1950, NAA: A5954, 1626/4.

¹⁹ Doc. 6 Attachment, "Future of Southwest Pacific Region – Conference Between Australian and New Zealand Ministers," Shedden to William Hodgson, Secretary Department of External Affairs, 7 January 1944, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937–49* Vol. 7: 1944, ed. W.J. Hudson (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services, 1988) (hereafter *DAFP* Vol. 7).



responsibility of warden of the sea lines of communication in Australia's immediate area of strategic interest.



Area Division of the ANZAM Region, September 1950, Courtesy National Archives of Australia, A5954, 1419/13.

Among the ANZAM nations, there was an acknowledgement that no immediate threat of war in the region was at that time present, nor, for that matter, were attacks on Australia.²⁰ Australia's Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), Rear Admiral John Collins, RAN, accordingly turned his attention to organising the higher command functions necessary for the effective control of sea lines of communication. The negotiation of the Radford-Collins Agreement was part of that process. The ANZAM area overlapped with the US Navy (USN) Pacific command.

²⁰ George Hall, First Sea Lord, to John Collins, Chief of Naval Staff, 27 April 1950, TNA: ADM 205/74, cited in Mark Gjessing, "Anglo-Australian Naval Relations and Cooperation, 1945–1975 (University of Leeds, PhD Thesis, 2011), 57.



Collins identified early-on the need for “some workable arrangement ready in the event of ... possible trouble” to avoid administrative conflict and ensure efficient operations.²¹ Such an arrangement was reached when Collins travelled to Pearl Harbor in early 1951 to meet and negotiate with Admiral Arthur Radford, Commander-in-Chief, US Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC).

The Radford-Collins Agreement, signed in September 1951, outlined the maritime boundaries of responsibility for naval control and protection of shipping, local defence and anti-submarine warfare. It also outlined command and control structures between CINCPAC and CNS in times of peace and war, facilitating USN and RAN cooperation for many years to come.²² Aside from the significance of Collins representing British-Australian-New Zealand naval interests – marking Australia’s willingness to assume greater responsibility in Commonwealth matters – the Radford-Collins Agreement in tandem with ANZAM highlighted Australia’s keen focus on the defence of its immediate region.

Recasting ANZAM: The Cold War, Defending Malaya and the Commonwealth Far Eastern Strategic Reserve

The Cold War swept dramatically into Asia, marked by the Chinese Communist Party takeover in mainland China, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the nationalist movements in Malaya and Indochina which heralded the Malayan Emergency and First Indochina War. The deteriorating strategic situation in the Asia-Pacific generated an increasing impetus for Australia and the RAN to take on a larger share of regional defence. In early-1952, the British COS conducted a major strategic review. The review concluded that nuclear deterrence was the most effective way of avoiding hot war with the Soviet Union. This was not the case in the Asia-Pacific region, which was deemed to be the area most susceptible to communist insurgencies and localised conflict. Britain could not afford to expand its commitments in the Asia-Pacific while also investing in its nuclear capabilities. The COS accordingly recommended the reworking of ANZAM for a more equitable distribution of the burden of defending Commonwealth interests, with greater commitments by Australia and New

²¹ Collins to Fraser, 20 December 1948, TNA: ADM 205/69, cited in Gjessing, “Anglo-Australian Naval Relations and Cooperation,” 59.

²² David Stevens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence Vol. 3: The Royal Australian Navy* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163-4; Alastair Cooper, “At the Crossroads: Anglo-Australian Naval Relations, 1945–1971,” *The Journal of Military History* 58, no. 4 (1994): 704-5.



Zealand.²³ It should be noted that the revision of ANZAM occurred against the backdrop of the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, the negotiation of the Five Power Staff Agency, and the British government's concerns that it would be sidelined in planning for the defence of the Asia-Pacific region – discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper and has been detailed elsewhere.²⁴

The Australian, British and New Zealand COS met in Melbourne in October 1953 to revise the ANZAM arrangements. Britain's view was that the defence of Malaya was central to Commonwealth interests in the region and, in the event of communist aggression the Kra Isthmus was the line of defence that absolutely had to be preserved.²⁵ This appraisal of Malaya also addressed the lingering question of the defence of the Middle East. The British had conceded that, so long as there was regional instability and Australia saw a threat to its national security, the nation would not be willing to send forces to the Middle East. The practical next step, then, was to encourage Australia to commit to regional defence through assuming a greater role in the defence of Malaya. Fortuitously, Australia shared Britain's view. The responsibility for the defence of Malaya was accordingly transferred from Britain alone to the shared duty of the ANZAM COS, which was to be a permanent body residing in Melbourne for peace and wartime planning and operations.²⁶

Crucial to the protection of Malaya was the creation of the FESR. First tabled by the British government at the 1953 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, the FESR saw the ANZAM countries commit to stationing a trained and equipped joint military force in Malaya. In the reworking of ANZAM and the creation of the FESR, Britain had acknowledged that its position was such that it could no longer provide the forces required to respond to regional conflict. This situation ultimately raised the profile of the RAN as Britain looked to continued cooperation as an opportunity to augment its naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, in the wake of the reworking of ANZAM and the decision to develop

²³ "Review of Defence Policy and Global Strategy," COS Report, 7 February 1952, TNA: DEFE 6/20/17; Umetsu, "British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve," 512-14.

²⁴ For a succinct overview see, Umetsu, "The Origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve," 517-22.

²⁵ This principle was later codified in Operation Hermes, wherein all ANZAM resources would be mobilised towards preserving this line. Operation "HERMES," NAA: A1209, 1957/4250.

²⁶ Defence Talks Melbourne 1953 – Sir John Harding Chief of the Imperial General Staff/Australia and New Zealand, NAA: A1209, 1957/5023; Edwards and Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments*, 162-3; David Lee, "Australia and Allied Strategy in the Far East, 1952–1957," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 16, no. 1 (1993): 515-6.



the FESR, Admiral of the Fleet Rhoderick McGrigor, RN, described the RAN's primary role as

“the defence of sea communications in the ANZAM area, the most important of which are those between Australia and that part of Asia where Australian forces will be engaged in the natter against Communism. The forward strategy of defence in South East Asia is not possible unless this is done ... This responsibility cannot be passed to any other nation [other than Australia].”²⁷

The creation of the FESR was officially announced in April 1955, at which point Prime Minister Robert Menzies defined its two-fold role. Firstly, as a deterrent and counter to Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, with units able to be deployed in the event of an attack on Malaya, Singapore, or the sea lines of communication. The second role was to aid in maintaining Malaya's internal security as the Emergency continued to unfold.²⁸ The RAN's contribution to the FESR took the form of ANZAM maritime exercises, involving two destroyers or frigates serving alongside ships of the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal New Zealand Navy on the Far East Station, as well as an annual visit by the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*. Several RAN officers also served alongside their British colleagues in RN vessels.²⁹ The RAN's contribution to the FESR is, as David Stevens notes, an embodiment of the Cold War policy of forward defence.³⁰ Furthermore, it arguably underscores the maturation of Australia's strategic thinking and understanding of the maritime domain, as the nation sought to maintain its strategic isolation through force projection at the furthest edges of its regional sea approaches.

Throughout the late-1960s and into the 1970s, the ANZAM arrangement was restructured and eventually disbanded in response to the decolonisation process in Southeast Asia and Britain's intention to withdraw forces East of Suez. Much of the concept and machinery remained in place, with the key change being a name change to ANZUK in November 1971 to reflect the trilateral nature of the arrangement. There was also a move away from the defence of the Malayan Peninsular towards “the common strategic military interests of the three countries in regional security in those Pacific and Indian Ocean areas with which the three countries are

²⁷ Rhoderick McGrigor, Admiral of the Fleet, to Shedden, 3 November 1954, NAA: A5954, 46/3, cited in Grey, *Up Top*, 7.

²⁸ Statement by Menzies, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April 1955, cited in Edwards and Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments*, 169.

²⁹ Grey, *Up Top*, 24-6.

³⁰ Stevens, *Australian Centenary History of Defence*, 182.



concerned”.³¹ By 1973, Australia’s withdrawal from Vietnam, China’s desire to avoid major conflict, and the policy of *détente* all pointed to relative stability in the global order and, from Australia’s vantage point, a need to reorganise defence.³² This climate heralded, among other things, the formation of the ANZUK Reorganisation Committee which oversaw the reduction and eventual end to ANZUK activities. The final report on ANZUK was delivered on 31 December 1974. With this, the ANZAM concept came to an end.³³

Conclusion

This paper has examined the developments of the ANZAM arrangement, firmly locating its origins in the lessons learnt during the Second World War and the concepts of the regionalisation of defence and joint Commonwealth military planning that emerged thereafter. Spanning from the Indian Ocean across to the Cook Islands in the South Pacific and up from New Zealand to Malaya, the ANZAM area codified Australia’s strategic zone of responsibility. Moreover, as it evolved and heralded the creation of the Radford-Collins Agreement and the FESR, the arrangement gave formal expression to Australia’s commitment to its immediate region and was a valuable instrument for maritime contributions to this end. In this way, ANZAM can be seen to have played a significant role in directing Australia’s defence planning and operations as it responded to the changing forces and power balances in the post-war Asia-Pacific.

³¹ Meeting of ANZAM Chiefs of Staff Committee, 6 July 1971, Annex B, SPC-A.

³² Stevens, *Australian Centenary History of Defence* 212-14.

³³ L.D. MacLean, “ANZIM to ANZUK – An Historical Outline of ANZAM,” Department of Defence, Historical Monograph No. 96, April 1972, 34-7, SPC-A.