

## Maritime lessons from the Peloponnesian War

When looking towards the future of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), many would not choose to reflect on the Peloponnesian War, a conflict fought two and half thousand years ago by combatants and weapons hardly recognisable to a modern navy. Yet, when considering the many lessons that can be gleaned from this war, it becomes apparent that quite a few of them are salient to the future operations of the RAN. The Peloponnesian War was a maritime war, fought across the littoral of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean and Black Seas, and as far west as Sicily. The war involved various navies of the Greek world conducting combat operations at and from the sea, diplomatic operations, and constabulary operations – the span of maritime tasks in modern Australian Maritime Doctrine.<sup>1</sup> When look towards the near- and medium-term future it is readily apparent that these tasks will remain at the core of what the RAN will be called upon for in all likely future scenarios.

### The Peloponnesian War

Briefly, the Peloponnesian War was fought in the period spanning 431–404 BCE. It saw the involvement of almost all of the Greek city-states across the Mediterranean, including in Sicily and the Anatolian littoral (Modern day Turkish coast) and up into the Black Sea. Two main protagonists, Athens and Sparta, fought a protracted war across the Mediterranean on land and at sea, with maritime operations dominating the conduct of the war. Athens was the great sea power of the ancient Greek world, and although Sparta is remembered for its land army of hoplite warriors, it was only when Sparta embraced a sea power strategy that they were able to defeat Athens.<sup>2</sup>

Athens under the leadership of the great statesman Pericles undertook a strategy based on sea power. The city itself was heavily fortified and connected to the port of the Piraeus by the ‘Long Walls’, ensuring uninterrupted and secure access to the port and the sea. From there Athens could send out fleets to attack Spartan interests and keep itself supplied with food and war supplies, in turn protected by its powerful navy. Resources, especially tribute money, flowed into Athens via the Delian League, a vast network of other Greek city-states that paid Athens in return for prosperity through maritime trade and protection from enemies. In effect, Athens was an island, a metaphor used by Pericles and indeed other Greeks when referring to Athenian strategy throughout the fifth century.<sup>3</sup> This strategy saw the Athenian fleet conduct combat operations at sea against enemy fleet units and merchant vessels, and combat operations from the sea in landing military units ashore on the Peloponnesian coast, most famously at Pylos in the modern bay of Navarino. The Athenian fleet conducted diplomatic operations, before and during the war. This included reassurance, sending a small fleet to the island city-state of Corcyra (modern Corfu) in order to support this new Athenian ally and hopefully dissuade the Corinthian fleet from attacking. On the

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<sup>1</sup> As first articulated by Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 16; Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 234; Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine* (Canberra: Sea Power Centre–Australia, 2010), p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Space precludes a thorough examination of sea power and the Peloponnesian War. For a more comprehensive work, see: Nash (2018) ‘Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War’.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides 1.143.5; “The Old Oligarch,” Pseudo-Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Athenians*, trans. R. Osborne, 2nd ed. (London: London Association of Classical Teachers, 2004), 2.14–16.

more coercive side, Athens was well-known for sending out a fleet to cruise the Aegean and even the Black Sea in order to find new allies for the Delian League, with the presence of a fleet of several dozen ships and thousands of men acting as an incentive. Finally, Athenian vessels protected trade, both their own and other trade, from disruption and helped suppress piracy, what we might term maintaining ‘good order at sea’.<sup>4</sup> In these various ways, Athenian sea power is readily recognisable to modern scholars studying the fundamentals of maritime operations – fundamentals still adhered to across the modern world.

The issue of Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War is not a proof of the superiority of a so called ‘land power’ – Sparta – over that of a ‘sea power’. It was only when Sparta embraced a maritime strategy that they were successful. This was firstly enabled by Athenian overreach in Sicily, where a huge expeditionary force of infantry, some cavalry, and a large number of ships was eventually destroyed by the forces of Syracuse, itself a budding sea power.<sup>5</sup> After three naval battles in the Great Harbor of Syracuse, the Athenian fleet was destroyed, trapping the land element in Sicily and forcing them into a fruitless retreat that saw them all killed or captured. After this crushing defeat the Spartans renewed their war against Athens on all fronts, and with the aid of Persian money were able to finance a fleet that took the fight to the Athenian centre of Gravity – the Delian League itself and the islands and maritime trade routes that supported Athens with food and money. Unable to project power across the seas and with its maritime trade increasingly under threat the Athenians were forced into battle in the Hellespont (modern Dardanelles) and their fleet annihilated at the battle of Aigispotamoi. The members of the Delian League had either been defeated or had defected from Athens, and with no fleet left to protect the critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) the city was starved into submission through blockade by land and at sea. What is noteworthy here is that the defining battles of the second stage of the War, the so called ‘Decelean’ or ‘Ionian’ War were not fought in mainland Greece near the cities of Sparta or Athens,<sup>6</sup> but in the Aegean littoral and into the Black Sea region. It was the ability to project power far across the seas that enabled victory for Sparta.

### **The future of the Royal Australian Navy**

As much as one can look into the future and make judgements on potential naval and military operations it seems as if many of the core lessons of the Peloponnesian War will remain salient for the RAN and the wider ADF.

Recent works have cast doubt upon the current and future force structure of the RAN and the ADF, decrying a future that sees a so called ‘balanced force’ as the RAN’s future. While some see requiring balance in the ADF’s force structure as ‘lazy thinking’,<sup>7</sup> others rightly point out that this isn’t the case so long as it is not done for the sake of it and that there is purpose to the projected balance.<sup>8</sup> This is all in the context of the current debate surrounding Professor Hugh White’s latest

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this see: Till (2013): 38-9.

<sup>5</sup> With notable aid from Sparta and other Peloponnesian allies.

<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the Spartan Land army setting up a fort at Decelea, from whence this stage of the war gets its name, though it is more properly the ‘Ionian’ war for the region where it was mostly fought.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Davies (2019), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/requiring-balance-in-the-adfs-force-structure-is-lazy-thinking/>

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Hellyer (2019), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/taking-australian-strategic-thought-to-the-school-of-athens/>

work, *How to Defence Australia* and its prescriptions for Australia's future defence.<sup>9</sup> It does not call for a balanced force, but one geared towards a strategy of sea denial in which the RAN would be reduced to a fleet of submarines.<sup>10</sup> This is a navy geared towards high-end warfighting only, and only in competition with a regional superpower – China in White's scenario – and useful only in defending the Australian littoral and near seas. This would be the Athenians of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE stuck on their metaphorical island with a navy capable of taking on all comers, provided they were within a few miles of the Piraeus and no further. It is a strategy that would see an island – Athens or Australia – already inherently incapable of self-sufficiency and reliant on overseas trade, unable to defend any of its interests further than its immediate littoral. This is exactly the wrong strategy for Australia and the wrong future for the RAN.

### **Military Operations and Trade protection**

Combat operations are the *raison d'etre* of navies, be it combat operations at or from the sea. This was true of the Athenian and Spartan navies during the Peloponnesian War, and the stated mission of the RAN is still 'To Fight and Win at Sea'.<sup>11</sup> In all future scenarios, this will remain true for the defence of Australia to succeed. The only real question is the ways in which this will be done.

Australia is a maritime nation, reliant on the sea and the vital sea lines of communication that cross it from around the globe. This is two-way traffic: imports of vital oil and refined petroleum products,<sup>12</sup> as well as a vast array of other manufactured goods, and exports of a variety of bulk goods, from iron ore through to wheat. Simple geography dictates that these imports and exports will cross the seas to a large extent, especially bulk cargo. Therefore, Australia's sea lines of communication are a major vulnerability as far as Australia's prosperity and even survival go.

In the highly likely scenario where a future conflict threatens Australia's maritime trade, far before the actual territory of Australia itself is threatened, then the RAN would be at the forefront of any response. The response will be dependent on the threat, which need not be conflict with a superpower such as China. Australian trade passes through many parts of the world subject to security threats: from the always tense Strait of Hormuz, to the potential piracy hotspots of East Africa and the Malacca Straits. Here it is worth pointing out a key fallacy in the idea that Australia can be protected by a fleet with nothing more than submarines and fast attack craft. Submarines do not protect shipping: they sink it, or through Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR) operations, allow for the targeting of shipping by air or surface units. Against a swarm of fast attack craft targeting shipping, as happened with the British tanker detained by Iran recently,<sup>13</sup> a submarine would be all but useless: likewise, against a more serious threat by fixed and rotary wing aircraft or land-based missile batteries.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, even a modest threat posed by pirates

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<sup>9</sup> Brief reviews and summation: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hugh-white-calls-for-australia-to-scrap-ships-and-build-more-submarines/> and <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/book-review-hugh-white-s-how-defend-australia>

<sup>10</sup> Although for a good dissection of the problem with White's conception of Sea Denial, see:

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/is-sea-denial-without-sea-control-a-viable-strategy-for-australia/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.navy.gov.au/about-royal-australian-navy>

<sup>12</sup> A topic of much recent conversation, largely thanks to a report in which Australia's fuel supply vulnerability was laid bare, and written by former Deputy Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force, Air Vice-Marshal John Blackburn AO (Retd): *Australia's Liquid Fuel Security. A Report for NRMA Motoring and Services*, 28 February 2013.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-49053383>

<sup>14</sup> Noting that the above Iranian seizure was supported by a helicopter.

and speedboats would be beyond the ability of a submarine to defend against. Moreover, considering the vast distances these hotspots are from Australia, a patrol boat-type vessel could not do and this work and thus it would require a frigate or large ocean-going cutter or Offshore Patrol Vessel-type (OPV) of ship, armed to deal with surface and air threats at the very least. Of course, unless Australia got into the business of building self-sufficient overseas bases, this will require allied cooperation – probably the USA who White says we cannot count on in the future – or a serious amount of logistics support in the form of several large and capable replenishment vessels. Against a superpower or peer (relative to Australia) competitor, the protection of shipping will require a RAN equipped to deal with surface, sub-surface, and air threats.

Closer to home, it is doubtful that submarines will have much use against the other critical threat to Australian shipping: mines. In the year 2016-16, a mere ten ports in Australia accounted for 88% of all seaborne export cargo loaded.<sup>15</sup> Located in the east, west, and north of Australia, these ports would require a rapid reaction force of deployable mine warfare specialists, be they divers, Uninhabited Underwater Vehicles (UUV), mine warfare vessels, or most likely a combination of all these assets. In most scenarios surface vessels will be required, either as ‘motherships’ for UUVs and divers, or in more conventional mine warfare roles of Hunting and Sweeping. The mine warfare threat to Australian ports is not an overt one, but one that could be carried out by any number of means, most of which would not involve obvious minelaying by an enemy combatant and therefore not liable to interception by submarines or Joint Strike Fighters. Further afield, mining is a potential problem for Australian shipping overseas where cargo is loaded, or through choke-points and other shipping channels: Hormuz, Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, Torres Strait and others. This is not a new consideration, and the RAN has stood ready to deploy a Mine Warfare element overseas since the ‘Tanker War; and the little known Operation ‘Sandglass’.<sup>16</sup> It is hard to imagine a future in which the RAN does not need a mine warfare capability, rapidly deployable within Australia and to key overseas locations, potentially with the need for logistics and local protection by Australian military assets. These units themselves might need to deploy by air and/or by sea in amphibious warfare vessels.

Finally, the future of the RAN will almost certainly involve the projection of power ashore. One can think of any number of potential hotspots in the Indo-Pacific that might demand Australia’s attention: to do a ‘Timor 2.0’ in the region due to political, social, economic, or even climactic reasons. There is no need to postulate that the RAN’s LHDs will be used only for goodwill visits, humanitarian relief – no trivial task in itself<sup>17</sup> – or at the extreme end, to launch an amphibious assault against Fiery Cross Reef or the shores of Shanghai, or other far-fetched notions. The LHDs are not merely high value assets that are too costly to protect, but vital to any number of security threats which may arise in the Indo-Pacific region, be it humanitarian and disaster relief or the projection of stronger force ashore to stabilise a dangerous situation. Unless Australia completely abandons any notions of playing by the ‘rules based global order’ or of being a good international

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<sup>15</sup> 2016-16 being the latest official published data. Australian Government Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, *Statistical report Australian sea freight 2015–16* (2018): P. 50: Available: [https://www.bitre.gov.au/publications/2018/files/asf\\_2015\\_16.pdf](https://www.bitre.gov.au/publications/2018/files/asf_2015_16.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> For a brief overview of OP Sandglass, see: Beazley (2008): 23-29. For the Tanker War in general and Western involvement: Zatarain (2009).

<sup>17</sup> More of which, see below section on Diplomatic Operations.

citizen, this will require the ability to project force from the sea, with a RAN capable of conducting hard and soft power taskings.

At this state, it will seem as if this essay has been overly critical of submarines. This is not my intent, and indeed the future of the RAN most certainly involves submarines, and in greater numbers than ever. Returning to the opening statement of this section, the core role of navies is and always has been combat operations, a role for which submarines are ideally and almost entirely designed for. Submarines will have a role in the future RAN sinking enemy vessels and providing vital and silent ISR for targeting. They are a strategic asset, capable of wreaking havoc upon an enemy with little to no warning. They are just not suited to being the first and only defence for Australia. The moment that Australia's first line of defence involves MK 48 heavyweight torpedoes is clearly one of failure and desperation.

## Diplomatic operations

*He [Pericles] displayed their power to the barbarian tribes living around and to their kings and lords the magnitude of their power and the confidence and impunity with which they sailed where they wished, having made all of the sea subject to their control.*<sup>18</sup>

The idea of using warships as tools of diplomacy has a long history, including to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the years leading up to the Peloponnesian War. The Royal Australian Navy has been a tool of diplomacy throughout its history: its very creation a signal to the world that Australia intended to be a player in world affairs, independently and as part of the wider British Empire.

Deployments such as Indo-Pacific Endeavor (IPE) 2019, with the deployment of 1200 personnel, four ships, eight helicopters, a P-8A Poseidon aircraft and a Collins-class submarine visiting seven countries throughout the region,<sup>19</sup> are a powerful use of the RAN and a clear demonstration of Australia's interest in the region. While less belligerent than Pericles' cruise, the deployment of RAN units on future IPEs will be a signal to friends and potential foes that Australia is willing and able to make its presence known in the Indo-Pacific. The important point is that this must be a warfighting fleet, capable of fighting and winning at sea. The Athenians cowed potential enemies and reassured friends because all sides knew that Athenian triremes were, first and foremost, warships. A future RAN *Hunter* class frigate will be a powerful tool of naval diplomacy only if it is seen as a fighting ship and not merely a flight deck for cocktail parties, though even this aspect should not be underestimated. Submarines can fulfil this role in only a very limited manner, with less visible presence and with a far more coercive edge.

It is also of paramount importance to recognise that naval diplomacy is not a second-rate task for the RAN or other navies, but is core business for the longest reaching and most persistent of military-diplomatic arms. Australia has engaged in regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) since 1918 when HMAS *Encounter* was dispatched to Tonga in response to the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918-19.<sup>20</sup> Far from being trivial, such operations have real

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<sup>18</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 20.1.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://news.navy.gov.au/en/May2019/IPE19/5243/Smiles-the-key-to-a-successful-IPE19.htm#.XWlyuegzaUk>

<sup>20</sup> Stevens, *The RAN and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*: <http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/ran-and-1918-19-influenza-pandemic>

benefits. For instance, the US Navy's response to the Tsunami in Northern Indonesia, *Unified Assistance*, saw the US's popularity in Indonesia rise a full 39% from a desultory 15% in the span of a few weeks.<sup>21</sup> Not for nothing does the RAN in the form of IPE and the US Navy through operations such as *Pacific Partnership* – in which Australia regularly participates<sup>22</sup> – conduct naval diplomacy. Of note is China's activity in these types of operations, conducting Humanitarian operations and more overt displays of naval reach:<sup>23</sup> witness the mass consternation and borderline panic at the recent visit of two People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels to Sydney.<sup>24</sup> It is hard to imagine that this was *not* the reaction they were going for, and once again demonstrates the utility of warships in modern diplomatic operations.

### **Constabulary operations**

Perhaps the biggest potential change in the way the RAN will operate is in the constabulary role. Although the ancient evidence is sparse, it appears as if the ancient Athenians and other navies conducted constabulary operations in order to protect trade from pirates.<sup>25</sup> The RAN and the RAAF have contributed to this role in the Gulf of Aden for many years, helping to maintain 'good order at sea'.<sup>26</sup> The RAN and wider ADF conduct operations in support of OP Solania, maritime surveillance within the Pacific Region.<sup>27</sup> This fulfils the constabulary role, as well as a diplomatic one through regional engagement with Australia's neighbours. In this respect it can be hard to separate the two concepts, and this was certainly the case in the Peloponnesian War, where the idea of a standing force used for policing was essentially non-existent in the civil realm, let alone a role that militaries might conduct. In this sense the future of the RAN may see a similar construct, where *domestic* constabulary operations are not core business, but left to other agencies, in the Australian case, the Australian Border Force.<sup>28</sup> In a less secure future, a prospect of Hugh White's that certainly should not be dismissed, it is entirely possible that much like the Athenian navy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the RAN will engage in constabulary operations overseas with the primary aim of maintaining 'good order at sea' and while being technically a constabulary tasking, it will in reality fall within the realm of naval diplomacy. Naval resources, especially personnel, are scarce and so it may be that the RAN shifts focus away from domestic constabulary task in order to grow its warfighting force.

### **Conclusion**

The oared, wooden vessels used by 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek navies do not immediately come to mind when thinking of the future of the RAN, a force that will contain weapons and technology unimagined by Pericles or Brasidas. Yet, as an understanding of the Peloponnesian War reveals, the core roles of navies have remained little changed over the intervening 2500 years. Navies have

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<sup>21</sup> Elleman (2007): p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/adf-support-regional-health-care-pacific-partnership-18>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-18/peace-ark-chinas-floating-hospital-in-the-pacific/10007894>

<sup>24</sup> 'Chinese warships arrive in Sydney as Beijing warns of South China Sea resolve':

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-03/chinese-warships-enter-sydney-harbour-south-china-sea-claims/11172578>; 'Three Chinese warships dock in Sydney Harbour — but were they even invited?':

<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/three-chinese-warships-dock-in-sydney-harbour-but-were-they-even-invited-2019-6>

<sup>25</sup> Nash (2018): p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> For more on this concept see: Till (2013): 38-9.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.defence.gov.au/Operations/SouthWestPacific/>

<sup>28</sup> Or even standing up a Coast Guard, as has long been mooted in Australia.

always need to fight and win at sea in order to project power ashore and protect core interests, especially maritime trade: lifeblood of ancient Athens and of modern Australia. Navies are powerful diplomatic tools, reassuring or coercing as need be, often at the same time. Finally, navies are useful in constabulary operations, especially in reinforcing diplomatic aims by helping to maintain good order at sea. The future of the RAN will see these core roles remain. Australia cannot be defended by submarines and aircraft alone and it will require a balanced naval force: not to appease the wants and egos of Admirals, but because the threats that face Australia are myriad, dispersed, and not always combatable through a periscope. The Athenians lost their war because they could not protect their vital maritime interests in a theatre of war far removed from their homeland. The RAN will need to ensure that it is placed to defend Australia's interests in ways that the Athenians could not.

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