

# BLACK SWAN

## STRATEGY PAPER

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**AUSTRALIA AND THE PROVISION OF MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN:  
MOBILISING REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND LEVERAGING THE ALLIANCE**

Authored by Dr Troy Lee-Brown



**DEFENCE AND SECURITY THROUGH AN INDO-PACIFIC LENS**



## Black Swan Strategy Paper #11

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**Front Cover Image:** INS Vagir, HMAS Rankin and HMAS Perth conduct manoeuvre exercise at the Western Australian Exercise Area during the Indian Submarine INS Vagir visit to Fleet Base West in Perth, Western Australia.



← HMAS Anzac conducts a ceremonial passage exercise with Indian Navy INS Kiltan during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 21.

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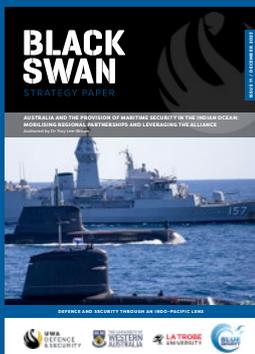


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## About the Black Swan Strategy Papers

The *Black Swan Strategy Papers* are the flagship publication of the UWA Defence and Security Institute (DSI). They represent the intersection between Western Australia and strategic studies – both of which are famous for their black swans. The series aims to provide high-quality analysis and strategic insights into the Indo-Pacific region through a defence and security lens, with the hope of reducing the number of 'black swan' events with which Australian strategy and Indo-Pacific security has to contend. Each of the Black Swan Strategy Papers are generally between 5,000 and 15,000 words and are written for a policy-oriented audience. The Black Swan Strategy Papers are commission works by the UWA DSI by invitation only.

This special edition of the Black Swan Strategy Paper is proudly in collaboration with Blue Security – Maritime Exchange Project through La Trobe University.



↑ Command Team members from Indian Navy Ship Satpura are winched up to the boat deck of HMAS Hobart in preparation for a planning meeting during Exercise Kakadu 22.

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↑ Personnel from the Australian Army and Sri Lanka Marine Corps prepare to embark an United States Marine Corps CH-53E Super Stallion on board Royal Australian Navy Landing Helicopter Dock HMAS Canberra (L02) as part of an air assault exercise during Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2022 in the Pacific Ocean.

## Executive summary

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become an increasingly competitive maritime domain for the world's great powers in an era where the region also faces quickly-escalating environmental pressures and an array of non-military maritime security threats. For Australia – with a vast Indian Ocean coastline, an enormous resource-laden EEZ, and crucial exports of iron ore and hydrocarbons from the North West of the country – the Indian Ocean is vitally important to the national bottom-line. Over the past decade, Australia has been at the forefront of redefining the region from the 'Asia-Pacific' to the 'Indo-Pacific' thus viewing the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean as an interconnected strategic space. In Australia's recent defence and foreign affairs documents, its 'immediate region' is defined as "ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific." However, as a large island-nation that truly reflects an Indo-Pacific geography, Australia faces some increasingly difficult strategic choices.

As one of the larger and more developed powers in the Indian Ocean Region, it is in Australia's interests to contribute significantly towards developing a more robust regional maritime security regime. It is particularly important given the limited amount of resources of many Indian Ocean littoral and island states at a time of numerous emerging maritime threats. The Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia will remain the primary areas of Australian strategic maritime efforts for the foreseeable future. And while an increased Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean remains a central concern of Australia and its security partners, a response to that presence can also be utilised to help ameliorate other non-military maritime security issues. In an environment of limited maritime resources, Australia will need to implement an IOR maritime strategy; mobilise its strategic partnerships in the region; and leverage its relationship with ally the United States to help strengthen Indian Ocean maritime security.

## Policy recommendations

- Australia can contribute to a greater provision of maritime security in the IOR by clearly articulating and implementing Australia's Indian Ocean maritime security strategy.
- Australia can also strategically mobilise key regional partnerships such as India and France in order to more effectively apportion maritime responsibilities across the entire Indian Ocean Region.
- The US now has a greater strategic footprint across Northern Australia and in Western Australia via the Submarine Rotational Force – West (SRF-West), US Force Posture Initiative (USFPI), and the Marine Rotational Forces – Darwin (MRF-D). With a growing US strategic presence in the immediate region, Australia can leverage its most important ally the United States to undertake a more focused maritime role in the Indian Ocean.

## Introduction

**When Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles addressed the House of Representatives in February 2023 on ‘Securing Australia’s Sovereignty’, he maintained that “as a three-ocean nation, our interests stretch across the entirety of the Indo-Pacific”<sup>1</sup>**

Australia truly has an Indo-Pacific geography; however, despite the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept officially coming to the fore a decade earlier in the 2013 Defence White Paper, the strategic focus continues to remain fixed on the Pacific and the archipelago to the north. On the western side of the continent, Australia has the longest Indian Ocean coastline in the region and a resource-laden EEZ with the North West vitally important to the national bottom-line through vast exports of iron ore and hydrocarbons. These critical exports depend on maintaining maritime security to ensure open sea lanes, particularly in the north-east Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca and into the Western Pacific.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) continues to grow in international strategic importance, both in terms of its relevance as a key conduit for global trade and as an area of strategic significance in an era of increased geopolitical competition. In recent years, a more forward-leaning Chinese naval presence has become a great cause of concern for more established Indian Ocean powers such as India, France, the United States and Australia. A greater People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) presence has grown in line with increased Chinese trade, infrastructure and investment throughout the region. The IOR is also dealing with complex environmental issues, including those related to climate change, and other non-military security threats such as illegal unreported and

unregulated (IUU) fishing, smuggling and piracy. For island and littoral states these non-military threats are paramount, and the provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean remains challenging both nationally and regionally. A majority of them have modest, developing economies and struggle to maintain effective oversight and control of their valuable maritime jurisdictions. Ineffective state governance is compounded on a regional level, where multilateral architecture is present but mostly underdeveloped and inadequate for dealing with an array of emerging threats.

Therefore, in this environment, a central challenge presents itself for Australia. In an era of emerging maritime threats – both military and non-military – in the Indian Ocean, how can Australia both address its national concerns over security and sovereignty while also contributing to improving the level of regional maritime and civil governance? This paper takes a holistic view on defining the ‘provision of maritime security’ in the IOR by Australia,



<sup>1</sup> Royal Australian Navy and Australian Fisheries Management Authority work alongside other Government agencies to protect Australia’s borders, during Operation RESOLUTE in northern Western Australia, September 2023.

whereby the maritime aspects of Australia's national security and the building of more resilient regional maritime security and governance are intertwined. The Australian Navy can work with larger security partners to increase naval capabilities through patrolling, greater interoperability and access to bases, while also working with smaller littoral and island states through providing maritime capacity-building measures. To be sure, there is significant overlap in addressing military and non-military threats and in the roles that actors can play in the development of a more robust maritime security architecture. Australia can utilise the growing regional focus on addressing geopolitical tensions in the military realm by simultaneously seeking to counter an increase in environmental and non-military maritime security threats.

Since the 1990s, the international community has gradually placed more importance on the effective management of the world's maritime jurisdictions – for upholding national security, pursuing opportunities in the blue economy, helping to negate growing environmental concerns, and supporting all facets of human security. This is particularly important in an era of multiple emerging maritime threats: those that threaten international peace,

**Given the limited diplomatic, defence and security resources that IOR states possess and the nature of numerous emerging maritime threats, it is a good time to consider how Australia can best contribute to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.**

such as geopolitical tensions or acrimonious territorial disputes; those that are non-military threats, such as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, piracy, smuggling and illegal migration; and emerging environmental threats such as those associated with climate change, ocean pollution and ecological habitat destruction. In order for states to pursue their maritime interests in a more complex threat environment, the concept of maritime security has become an increasingly useful tool for thinking about the provision of a safer, cleaner and more abundant marine environment.

Given the limited diplomatic, defence and security resources that IOR states possess and the nature of numerous emerging maritime threats, it is a good time to consider how Australia can best contribute to maritime security in the Indian Ocean. To be sure, the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia will remain the primary areas

of Australian strategic maritime efforts. However, as one of the larger maritime powers in the Indian Ocean, it is in Australia's interests to contribute towards developing a more robust regional maritime security and governance architecture. And while an increased Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean remains the primary concern of Australia and its partners, a response to that presence can also help to ameliorate other non-military maritime security issues. In an environment of limited maritime resources, Australia will need to better use its strategic partnerships and promote increased burden-sharing to strengthen Indian Ocean maritime security. By mobilising its key regional partnerships such as India and France, and leveraging its most important ally the United States to also play an increased but targeted role, Australia can better contribute towards the provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean.



↑ Indian Navy Ship Sumedha raised her National Flag in front of local Indian community members, Australian Defence Force Personnel and Ship's Company at the Port of Fremantle to mark 75 years of Independence..

## CHAPTER 1

# Mapping maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world. It is bound to the west by the East African coast, to the north by Arabia and India, and to the east by Indonesia and Western Australia.<sup>2</sup>

As an ocean bounded on three sides with Antarctica to the immediate south, the control of access through the Indian Ocean's choke points at the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb strait, and the Mozambique Channel become critically important. The countries of the Indian Ocean Region are home to approximately 2.6 billion people, or 40% of the world's population, also making it a focus for global trade and economics.<sup>3</sup> The sea lanes of the Indian Ocean carry half of the world's container ships, one third of all bulk cargo traffic and two thirds of the planet's oil shipments.<sup>4</sup>

In recent times, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has become more pronounced for both regional and extra-regional powers. The now broad adoption of the 'Indo-Pacific' regional concept by states across Asia, America and Europe is indicative that many countries now view the Indian and Pacific Oceans as an interlinked geographical entity. This notion of an expanded maritime-based region began with a more intense focus on the importance of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) that connect the hydrocarbons of the Middle East with the factories of East Asia.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, strategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean have now broadened to include geopolitical and geoeconomic contestation across the IOR, with an increased Chinese development, infrastructure, security and naval presence via Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>6</sup> Recent decades have also witnessed growing non-traditional maritime security issues such as piracy and IUU fishing, and the likelihood of more extreme natural disasters associated with climate change.



↑ Royal Australian Navy, United States Coast Guard and French Navy divers prepare to depart for their dive mission off the coast of Amedee Island in New Caledonia during Exercise Croix Du Sud 2023.

The adequate provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean is a growing challenge for littoral and island states both nationally and at a regional level. Two interrelated concepts – 'maritime security' and 'strategic mobilisation' – can be useful tools for thinking about how larger and smaller Indian Ocean states can more effectively cooperate on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The concept of 'maritime security' can help ascertain the core maritime interests and aims of a group of IOR states, and 'strategic mobilisation' is a way of thinking about the organisation of collective action in the pursuit of an identified aim or objective. Maritime security covers a broad range of interests, from national concerns over security and sovereignty through to transnational responsibilities over collectively governing the ocean commons. Strategic mobilisation can be understood in two stages: firstly, by identifying the overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them; and secondly by the organisation of a group to take collective action in pursuit of an identified goal.

Maritime security incorporates a wide range of threats from military and geopolitical contestation through to emerging non-military threats

associated with climate change, IUU fishing, piracy and marine pollution.<sup>7</sup> There exists an interlinkage between securing national and transnational interests from both military and non-military security threats. The provision of maritime security on a national level is a capability typically provided by naval and coastguard forces to maintain awareness of the maritime domain, as well as to conduct patrols and enforce national laws. On a transnational level, maritime security can be provided by coordinated security cooperation between naval forces and enforcement agencies of select countries and international organisations. This cooperation advances the needs of the international community and maintains the provision of 'good order at sea'.<sup>8</sup>

In order to address these threats and issues, the contemporary global maritime realm can be viewed as an interlinked security complex consisting of four domains with multiple overlapping security concerns: national security, marine environment, economic development and human security.<sup>9</sup> Maritime security can be understood as a 'state of affairs of the global maritime domain, in which international law and national law are enforced, freedom

of navigation is guaranteed and citizens, infrastructure, transport, the environment and marine resources are protected.<sup>10</sup>

There have been some fundamental changes in the Indian Ocean in recent decades with regard to the provision of maritime security. The main maritime-related threats to have emerged have predominantly been three-fold: growing geopolitical tensions particularly with an increased Chinese naval presence; an increase in non-military security threats; and the greater likelihood of environmental disasters, particularly those associated with climate change. IOR states therefore conceivably view their main interests as the successful management of great power rivalries and negating armed conflict between states; freedom of navigation and the maintenance of ‘good order at sea’ that allows for open commerce and trade; and the ability to address and mitigate the multitude of non-military security threats.

Following decades of relative amity, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a focus for renewed geopolitical contestation between the major powers. Since the turn of the century, China has emerged as a growing geopolitical and geoeconomic power in the Indian Ocean. Like other extra-regional states, China utilised its antipiracy missions in the Western IOR to establish an Indian Ocean naval base at Djibouti in 2017<sup>11</sup> and has now emerged as a prospective economic and security partner for IOR littoral and island countries intent on joining its ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as part of Beijing’s BRI.<sup>12</sup> This has caused a large measure of concern for key regional powers, none more so than India, with China contesting parts of its land border in the north and also developing partnerships for overland access to the Indian Ocean both on the western and eastern flanks of the Indian subcontinent.

China has recently developed overland access from its south-western province of Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and from the south-eastern Chinese province of Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal via the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Both corridors are partly designed to circumvent its so-called ‘Malacca Dilemma’.<sup>13</sup> An analysis of

Chinese policy documents indicates that the PLAN may one day be called upon to defend its Indian Ocean SLOCs and chokepoints, although its ability to project power into the region currently remains limited. However, the PLAN is aware of these shortfalls and if it can increase its relatively modest presence in the region, improve air defence and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, and overcome its logistics and sustainment challenges, it will also strengthen its ability to address its IOR operational limitations.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE) are involved in 17 ports in the Indian Ocean, whether recently completed or under construction, and whether in design or through direct financial involvement in the form of debt or equity.<sup>15</sup> China has also constructed so-called ‘dual-use ports’ at Gwadar in Pakistan, and at Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, which could allow access for substantial naval vessels.<sup>16</sup> Chinese SOEs are also building or planning to build ports at Chittagong in Bangladesh, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, and in multiple countries in East Africa.<sup>17</sup> Although Beijing’s overall strategy in the Indian Ocean remains ambiguous, it is clear that PLAN is actively acquiring a blue-water naval capability that will allow it to undertake a range of naval missions in China’s ‘far seas’.<sup>18</sup> The composition of Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean has evolved and now includes antipiracy forces, and hydrographic survey and intelligence-collection vessels.<sup>19</sup> These survey and intelligence vessels likely indicate intentions of a longer-term naval presence. PLAN submarines have been active in the IOR for over a decade, initially by Yuan-class diesel-electric attack submarines and more recently by Shang-class nuclear-powered boats.<sup>20</sup>

India has been termed a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean. However, it is still a work in progress in terms of military capability, despite an increased naval focus and associated military investment by New Delhi.<sup>21</sup> With one operational aircraft carrier, one launched but waiting on the acquisition of an air-wing, and a third being considered by government and navy, along with the acquisition of both conventional

and nuclear attack submarines, India is modernising its naval fleet. However, India’s Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Hari Kumar remarked at the 2022 Raisina Dialogue that “it is almost impossible for any one country to ensure maritime security”.<sup>22</sup> With limited US maritime power in the IOR combined with plateauing resources from France and the limited naval capacity of Australia, an era of heightened strategic competition between India and China will likely continue to influence the region in the short to medium term.<sup>23</sup> It is in this environment that a stable balance of power between India and its partners with an emerging China is desirable in order to maintain a peaceful Indian Ocean.

Although an increased Chinese naval presence has garnered much of the attention of Indian Ocean maritime powers, it represents only part of the regional maritime problem – particularly for smaller IOR littoral and island states. There exists an array of non-military security threats that smaller IOR states are extremely concerned about, and it is an area in which the larger maritime powers need to provide more focus. These threats, which are perhaps more concerning for the region, include piracy, IUU fishing, maritime-based terrorism and arms and drug smuggling,<sup>24</sup> as well as the effects associated with climate change, such as a rise in sea levels, ocean acidification and the increased likelihood of natural disasters.<sup>25</sup> The most significant barriers to productive maritime security cooperation include a lack of political trust between regional littoral and island states, especially with the increased involvement of extra-regional players. In addition, there is a lack of common interests and an overall lack of capacity in many regional states both large and small.<sup>26</sup> While Indian Ocean multilateral fora continue to play a role via institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), their governance capacity remains limited.<sup>27</sup> There may exist an opportunity to leverage the military-based naval responses of states to changing geopolitical circumstances to also address the numerous non-military maritime security threats.



↑ A Royal Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon is refuelled between missions at Indian Navy Air Station Rajali in Tamil Nadu, India during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 23.

## CHAPTER 2

# Australian contributions to maritime security in the Indian Ocean

**As the country with the longest Indian Ocean coastline, the Indian Ocean hasn't featured as prominently in Australian strategic thought and policy-making as one might expect.**

This is most likely for a multitude of reasons – not least that Australia has three oceans stretching to the east, south and west on which it must focus, and a strategic archipelago linking it into Southeast Asia. Despite this, and as made clear by the selection of the map in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR), the north-west coast and northern Australia play a defining role in Australia's defence, with Defence Minister Marles labelling it the nation's "strategic frontier".<sup>28</sup> Australia has numerous objectives in the Indian Ocean – ensuring that the region remains free of great power conflict, open trade flows including to and from north-western Australia, and addressing the region's multitude of non-military security challenges.<sup>29</sup>

For a vast island-continent, Australia has a limited maritime and naval capacity.<sup>30</sup> Australia relies enormously on the Indian Ocean for trade, particularly for exporting its minerals and hydrocarbons to markets directly to the north.<sup>31</sup> As the biggest markets for Australian resources such as iron ore, China and Northeast Asia's powerhouse economies contribute significantly in sustaining Australia's resources boom. Australia also has important offshore territories, an immense and abundant Indian Ocean EEZ with a vast search-and-rescue zone, evidenced by the 2014 search for missing passenger jet MH370. Australia also boasts the region's longest coastline, with Western Australia having a mainland shoreline of 12,895 kilometres and much of

it littoral to the Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup> Despite having an enormous stake in maintaining Indian Ocean security governance, Australia must balance its commitments with a limited capacity for maritime security.

The Indian Ocean hasn't figured prominently in Australian strategic policy and how the government has chosen to articulate its interests in its core defence and foreign policy documents. The Indian Ocean possibly held a greater focus for Australia pre-WWII when the 'mother country' Great Britain lay across the ocean to the west. This all changed during and following the war, when Australia's enemy Japan lay to the north and its new 'great and powerful friend' the United States lay to the north-east across the Pacific Ocean. Although there was a period of Australian consternation about the Soviet Navy operating in the Indian Ocean in the late 1960s<sup>33</sup>, the era, particularly since the late 1980s, was a benign period that didn't contain



↑ Sri Lanka fishing boat in the Indian Ocean.

a direct strategic threat. This began to gradually change from the early part of the new century. With the release of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU), Australia no longer has a 10-year warning time to prepare for potential major conflict in the region.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the catastrophic effects of climate change on Australia and its immediate neighbourhood have become more apparent in recent years and will increasingly pose an array of future non-military and environmental security threats.

Over the past decade, there has been an increased emphasis on the Indian Ocean in Australia's foreign policy and defence documents. The 2009 Defence White Paper (DWP) stretched the Australian Government's strategic geography by identifying a 'wider Asia-Pacific region' entailing 'North Asia to the Eastern Indian Ocean'. The 2009 DWP maintained that 'the Indian Ocean will have an increasingly strategic role to play within the ADF's primary operational environment'.<sup>35</sup> The 2012 'Australia in the Asian Century' paper noted the 'Indian Ocean is surpassing the Atlantic and Pacific oceans as the world's busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor' and that a 'new Indo-Pacific conception of the Asian region' entails that the 'western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean would come to be considered as one strategic arc'.<sup>36</sup> Although Australia officially adopted the Indo-Pacific as a way to describe its region in the early 2010s, Australian policy has placed a much lesser emphasis on the 'Indo' part of the geographical concept.

A greater focus on the Indian Ocean and India in the 2013 DWP was

likely due to it being the paper in which the 'Indo-Pacific' concept was substantially adopted in a major Australian policy document. It is also possible that it is due to having oversight from then defence minister Stephen Smith, himself a Western Australian and key proponent of the concept. The 2013 DWP highlights, the Government will engage closely with other countries with interests in the region to ensure that Indian Ocean dynamics are supported by the evolution, over time, of a more robust regional security architecture that provides mechanisms for the exchange of perspectives and management of the region's security challenges.<sup>37</sup> The 2013 DWP also talks about US relations at some length in the context of AUSMIN 2012 which was held in Perth, Western Australia. It explores the long-term opportunity for enhanced cooperation with the US Navy including at HMAS *Stirling*, and that 'Australia and the United States also agreed to continue exploring cooperation on Indian Ocean matters, reflecting our combined focus on the global strategic significance of the region.'

The 2016 DWP had a considerable number of mentions of the Indian Ocean but the context is quite narrow and mainly concentrated on the eastern Indian Ocean and the growing relationship with India. In the section on 'South Asia and the Indian Ocean Rim', the importance of container and energy shipping, offshore oil production, and food and natural resources are all emphasised. The 'Indian Ocean region is also likely to become a more significant zone of competition among major

powers, with China, India and the United States all increasing their levels of military activity in this region.'<sup>38</sup>

In 'maritime operations' the Indian Ocean gets a mention in the context of Australia requiring 'highly capable and versatile naval and maritime forces... to undertake a wide range of activities in support of the Strategic Defence Objectives'. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper had a very limited focus on the Indian Ocean – a small section on 'safeguarding maritime security' mentions the Indian Ocean in the context of energy SLOCs. In the 'Indo-Pacific Partnerships' section, 'India will remain the pre-eminent maritime power among Indian Ocean countries...[and] Australia wants to work with India as both countries invest in enhanced naval capabilities.'<sup>39</sup>

The Indian Ocean was beyond the scope of the Defence 2020 Force Structure Plan<sup>40</sup> and the 2020 DSU only mentions the Indian Ocean in the context of 'our immediate region'<sup>41</sup>. The 2023 'National Defence' Defence Strategic Review (DSR) places a greater emphasis on the Indian Ocean Region. Similar to other recent Defence documents, the 'primary area of military interest for Australia's *National Defence* is the immediate region encompassing the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific.'<sup>42</sup> The DSR recognises that 'Australia is a significant Indian Ocean state' and calls for an immediate upgrade of basing facilities in Western Australia, including both HMAS *Stirling* and RAAF Pearce near Perth. It also calls for comprehensive work and increased deployment to the series of 'bare' northern airbases including the Cocos Islands and the bases RAAF Learmonth near Exmouth and RAAF Curtin in the Kimberley. The ADF already has plans for a \$568 million upgrade to the airfield and facilities on the Cocos Islands to accommodate maritime patrol aircraft such as the P-8A Poseidon and MQ-4C Triton.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, expanding from a focus on the Pacific and Southeast Asia, the DSR recommends that the 'Defence Cooperation Program should continue to grow, particularly in the Indian Ocean region.'

A relative lack of focus on the IOR in Australian policy most likely reflects Australia's limited naval capacity, which gradually becomes more

pronounced the further away from the north-east Indian Ocean Australian assets are required to deploy.<sup>44</sup> Australian naval capacity remains limited despite it having one of its two largest naval bases, HMAS *Stirling*, situated south of Perth, home to the RAN's Anzac Class frigates and Collins Class submarines.<sup>45</sup> The main focus for assets stationed at HMAS *Stirling* remains on the archipelago to Australia's north and access through the north-eastern Indian Ocean.<sup>46</sup> Australia's naval presence in the IOR west of India remains very limited.

There have been recent announcements for significant naval-related investment on Australia's western seaboard. In March 2023, the AUKUS announcement signalled a major upgrade in facilities at HMAS *Stirling*, with an \$8 billion expansion of the naval base. HMAS *Stirling* will immediately undergo wharf upgrades and an expanded logistical capacity, with more frequent and longer visits by US and UK submarines from 2023. From 2027, the base will be home to Submarine Rotational Force West (SRF-West) and host rotations of US and UK nuclear-powered submarines. Alongside Hawaii and Guam, HMAS *Stirling* will be a primary base for US submarines in the Indo-Pacific. From the early 2030s, the base will be home to Australian nuclear-propelled Virginia Class submarines.<sup>47</sup>

The already significant Australian Marine Complex at Henderson adjacent to HMAS *Stirling* is also destined for major investment in the coming years. On the need for a \$4 billion dollar dry dock at Henderson, former Australian defence minister Christopher Pyne said, "AUKUS has given the need for an alternative to Captain Cook (large-vessel dry dock) because US and UK ships may well end up being maintained and sustained in Henderson to service the Indian Ocean." Another former defence minister, Linda Reynolds, said the dry dock would be a multi-user facility and provide a strong industrial base to support friends and allies in the Indian Ocean rim.<sup>48</sup> These significant upgrades to shipbuilding facilities in Western Australia could translate into a greater presence of foreign naval ships. A significant limitation is the small number of viable options for servicing and refuelling warships between Perth and Darwin. At present, Australian naval vessels

operating to the north-west must steam thousands of miles south to HMAS *Stirling* to refuel and resupply. The development of naval and maritime infrastructure at Exmouth could extend the range and timeliness of RAN operations in the Indian Ocean.<sup>49</sup>

Australia has sought to improve its level of naval outreach into the Indian Ocean in recent years, which not only establishes familiarity with the ADF but also contributes to building confidence and the level of interoperability with the military forces of regional partners. The ADF's Indo-Pacific Endeavour (IPE) is an annual undertaking that began in 2017 to strengthen Australia's engagement with the region's military forces. IPE constitutes Australia's flagship defence and security activity for regional engagement and defence diplomacy. It visited the same 14 countries that IPE22 visited in the north-east Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia over five months in the latter half of 2023. With a focus on the Indian Ocean, IPE23 included visits to Indian Ocean states such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.<sup>50</sup> The IPE model enables the ADF to increase its level of interoperability with regional security partners through joint exercises and training.<sup>51</sup>

Civil maritime security seeks to protect Australian interests by managing non-military risks to Australia's maritime domain. The 2020 Guide to Australian Maritime Security Arrangements (GAMSA) outlines Australia's maritime jurisdiction, including the Indian Ocean. However, beyond the 'Agreement for the Establishment of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission' there is little focus on direct threats and concerns in the Indian Ocean specifically.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the 2021 Australian Government Civil Maritime Security Strategy focuses on Australia's objectives and responses in order to secure its maritime domain; however, there is no geographical specificity to any actual regions.<sup>53</sup> In addition to a lack of policy with a distinct sub-regional focus, when relevant Australian Government publications utilise the term 'maritime security', they do not provide any evidence of an official definition of the term.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore difficult to prosecute a holistic maritime security

policy in the Indian Ocean, given this lack of a definition doesn't provide the scope to help initiate the action required.

There are multiple different policy areas across government that contain a maritime dimension, which casts Australian maritime security as a whole-of-government effort that depends on more than 20 Federal Government agencies.<sup>55</sup> However, the lack of an overarching Australian maritime security policy that would better coordinate this broad array of agencies likely contributes to a lack of effective policy in Australia's geographically defined sub-regions, such as the Indian Ocean. Australian Border Force (ABF) does have an Indian Ocean capacity, although the vast size of Australia's Indian Ocean EEZ makes the challenge of monitoring and interdicting illegal activities immense. While not a coastguard, the ABF is housed under the Department of Home Affairs, which coordinates border law enforcement agencies and customs services.

The multi-agency task force called the Maritime Border Command (MBC) is enabled by the ABF and has a remit to 'detect, deter, respond to and prevent civil maritime security threats... [whereby] operations are tailored to counter the eight civil maritime security threats to Australia's border', including illegal activities, marine pollution, piracy, maritime terrorism and exploitation of natural resources.<sup>56</sup> However, while it has been termed a *de facto* coast guard, a key role of the MBC is to contribute to Operation Sovereign Borders, an ADF-led operation aimed at stopping maritime arrivals of asylum seekers.<sup>57</sup> While the IOR has many maritime threats – many of them listed above – Australian contributions to maritime security in the IOR have predominantly been focused on asylum seekers. The ABF's Marine Unit has a permanent base in Darwin and its small fleet of larger ships are focused to the north, for example the Long-Term Ashmore Capability at Ashmore Reef. In wake of the 2023 DSR, there is the possibility of divesting the Australian Navy's new Arafura-class OPV fleet to other government agencies such as the ABF, which could conceivably contribute to a greater IOR maritime capability.<sup>58</sup>

## CHAPTER 3

# Australia and its maritime partners: Strategic mobilisation in the Indian Ocean

Following the previous chapter's outline of the limited state of Australia's maritime security in the Indian Ocean, the following two chapters will outline how Australia can best contribute to improving the provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

There has been an increased maritime focus on the region by the US, India, France and the UK among others, mainly in response to an increased Chinese naval presence. Additionally, the AUKUS agreement will see the rotation of American and British nuclear-powered submarines out of HMAS Stirling in Western Australia from 2027. Despite its limited naval and civil maritime capacity, Australia can better contribute to Indian Ocean maritime security by more effectively organising its own maritime resources in coordination with its strategic partners and allies.

The use of 'strategic mobilisation' can be helpful in thinking about how Australia might maximise its maritime capabilities and resources in order to improve IOR maritime security. Arzan Tarapore recently applied the concept of 'strategic leverage' to the Indian Ocean, in order to envisage how India, along with its Quad partners and France, might use select political relationships and military capabilities to consolidate the existing advantages of regional states and impede China's capacity to coerce them.<sup>59</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, strategic mobilisation is

a way of holistically thinking about how Australia can better contribute to improving the overall level of maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The use of strategic mobilisation in the Indian Ocean would focus on Australia and its select partners identifying common maritime threats and formulating solutions, then subsequently mobilising the necessary political and military relationships, which would address maritime security issues through utilising the existing strengths of strategic partners.

The utilisation of strategic mobilisation in the Indian Ocean by Australia could play out on three interrelated levels. On a political level, Australia and its partners both large and small would seek to improve the overall level of maritime security for Indian Ocean littoral and island states through sovereign capacity building. On a strategic level, Australia and its partners would develop a strategy of forward-deploying joint military or civil maritime forces. This would provide deterrence by denial of opposing naval forces such as the PLAN, and could also help address the multitude of non-military maritime security threats. The United States already provides critical support for forward-deployed US and allied forces out of Diego Garcia.<sup>60</sup> India could contribute basing for combined forward-deployed forces from the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, and likewise Australia from the Cocos Islands.

On an operational level, this would be achieved through building the level of military interoperability between Australia and its partners; and by developing a regional networked maritime security capability. Building a viable Australian capacity for maritime security in the Indian Ocean would entail: (1) developing a holistic maritime strategy and improving Australian naval and civil maritime capabilities; (2) upgrading Australia's island and littoral bases; (3) building on its key strategic maritime partnerships that facilitate higher levels of interoperability, joint patrols of vessels and reciprocal access to



↑ Bridge crew of Indian Naval Submarine Vagir issue directions as the submarine arrives at Fleet Base West, Western Australia.

bases and facilities particularly with India, France and the United States; and (4) investing into strengthening the maritime security capacity of other IOR island and littoral states such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

The political, strategic and operational aspects of strategic mobilisation elaborated on in Australia's 2023 DSR.<sup>61</sup> The primary area of focus in the IOR would be in Australia's EEZ and the Eastern Indian Ocean, as already outlined by government, with a secondary area of operation focused further towards the western Indian Ocean in conjunction with its strategic maritime partners. In the eastern IOR, Australia has strategically located offshore territories such as the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island and an immense and abundant Indian Ocean EEZ. Australia possesses the largest area of maritime jurisdiction of any Indian Ocean state, including an EEZ of 3.88 million square kilometres.<sup>62</sup> Australia needs to adequately protect its EEZ against threats such as illegal incursions by vessels, IUU fishing, terrorism, transnational crime and what the Australian government terms 'unauthorised maritime arrivals'.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean raises concerns for Australia and its strategic partners.

Australia should endeavour to pursue closer ties with key IOR maritime powers, however, it should not be to the detriment of greater engagement with small island and littoral states. Like Australia's recent policy tack in the Pacific Islands following the 2022 federal election, Canberra should listen to the main concerns of smaller IOR states regarding issues such as climate change and fisheries protection. Australia can provide a greater level of maritime capacity building for IOR states. Australia's closer defence and security ties with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and the recent announcement of an Australian High Commission in the Maldives are all positive and encouraging signs for the region.<sup>64</sup> In late 2022, a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft completed a mission to the Maldives which shows a high-level of trust and cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

Australia's Defence Cooperation Program includes the permanent

presence of Defence personnel, both civilian and military, and funding to deliver training, capability, equipment and infrastructure to regional states. The DSR called for the DCP to be expanded into the Indian Ocean,<sup>66</sup> although there has been evidence of the DCP operating in Sri Lanka as far back as 2015.<sup>67</sup> An expanded DCP may include states such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which have in the past aspired to a greater level of Australian defence engagement.<sup>68</sup> The ADF provided a two-day workshop on maritime law in Sri Lanka in July 2023 as part of the DCP during the IPE23 visit which can only help to build regional capacity.<sup>69</sup> All of these endeavours go towards building the maritime capacity of smaller IOR states.

Another area of strategic mobilisation in a political sense would be empowering regional states to better monitor and protect their maritime resources. Increased Australian assistance in the provision of maritime air surveillance, such as the May 2023 donation of a Beechcraft KA350 King Air, helps to bolster Sri Lanka's capacity to safeguard its maritime domain.<sup>70</sup> Australia could increase patrol-sized vessels in its EEZ and "introduce a variation of the successful Pacific Patrol Boat Program into the Indian Ocean region – an Indian Ocean Patrol Vessel Program."<sup>71</sup> Littoral and island states in the north-east Indian Ocean would benefit enormously from such a program. Patrol boats permanently based out of Australia's IOR territories such as the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island would offer greater and more timely monitoring and protection of Australia's EEZ.

In the north-east Indian Ocean, countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Seychelles and, Thailand, as well as perhaps even Mauritius in the western IOR, would all be ideal candidates for a patrol boat program. Such an IOR initiative would significantly contribute to improving regional stability and strengthen Australia's bilateral maritime and defence cooperation with the region's navies and coast guards.<sup>72</sup> An Australian Indian Ocean Patrol Boat Program could also work in conjunction with Indian, Japanese and US patrol boat programs. While Australian Border Force could increase its level

of engagement in the eastern Indian Ocean, ideally the establishment of an Australian coastguard is worth further consideration, with an emphasis on providing both regional outreach as well as border protection.<sup>73</sup>

India, Japan and France provide the greatest opportunity for Australia to utilise strategic mobilisation in the Indian Ocean, both bilaterally and in maritime-focused multilateral groupings. In the eastern IOR, India is rapidly developing into Australia's partner of choice, particularly in the maritime domain. There are doubters in New Delhi of Australia's capacity to meaningfully contribute to maritime security in the IOR, such as former BJP national general secretary Ram Madhav, whom insists, "India is the sole Indian Ocean power in the Quad."<sup>74</sup> However, in recent times, New Delhi has developed a more focused, issues-based defence partnership with countries such as Australia and Japan<sup>75</sup>, including much closer alignment between the RAN and the Indian Navy (IN) over the past decade.

In 2020, Australia and India agreed to a 'Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', which included a wide range of maritime security related issues.<sup>76</sup> AUSINDEX 21 was the fourth iteration of the biennial maritime warfare exercises, which have steadily increased in their level of interoperability and complexity. The 2021 exercises held off Darwin had two IN warships and a RAN frigate, with a focus on sensitive ASW training involving a RAN submarine, P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, RAAF fighter jets and embarked helicopters from both navies.<sup>77</sup> AUSINDEX 23 was held on the eastern seaboard off Sydney for the first time to coincide with Australia's inaugural hosting of the MALABAR Exercises.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, HMAS *Rankin*, INS *Vagir* and HMAS *Perth* conducted manoeuvre exercises at the Western Australian Exercise Area during INS *Vagir's* visit to Fleet Base West, which was the first deployment of an Indian submarine to Australia.<sup>79</sup>

There is the opportunity for India and Australia to cooperate more closely in the north-east Indian Ocean, particularly in reciprocal access to Indian and Australian island bases, which will enhance regional maritime surveillance. In addition to improved

maritime domain awareness (MDA) to combat things like IUU fishing, reciprocal access would allow Australia and India to more comprehensively monitor both surface and undersea vessels transiting Southeast Asia's strategic straits, particularly PLAN ships and submarines. On top of joint operation of P-8 aircraft during exercises, Australia and India began a combined maritime surveillance initiative in 2022 with reciprocal mainland visits to northern Australia and southern India.<sup>80</sup> During his June 2022 visit to New Delhi, Richard Marles conveyed that Australia was keen to build further on the June 2020 Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) agreement. Marles maintained, "as we continue to lift our defence and security cooperation, exploring longer-term reciprocal access arrangements is the logical next step."<sup>81</sup>

Extending the joint maritime surveillance initiative to India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Australia's Cocos Islands would be a 'force multiplier' and significantly improve the level of MDA of vessels traversing in and out of the Indian Ocean.<sup>82</sup> In July 2023, an Indian Navy Dornier maritime patrol aircraft and a C-130 Hercules visited the Cocos Islands, further elevating it as a base for Australian and Indian air surveillance.<sup>83</sup> Most crucially, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie close to the Strait of Malacca, while Australia's Cocos Islands are also located near Indonesia's Sunda and Lombok Straits. The Indian and Australian militaries can cooperate on maintenance and logistics, with both countries operating a significant number of US-made platforms, including C-17 and C-130 transports, P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, CH-47 and MH-60R helicopters, and the MQ-4C Triton UAS and MQ-9B Sea Guardian.<sup>84</sup>

Australia already cooperates with India on multiple endeavours to improve maritime security in the Indian Ocean, with a focus on improving the level of regional MDA. A successful Indian and Australian endeavour would see an MDA picture stretching from the Arabian Sea, through the north-east Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, and across northern Australia and into the Pacific. In February 2021, an Australian naval officer was formally posted to India's



↑ A Indian Navy UH-3H Sea King helicopter prepares to launch from HMAS Adelaide during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2022

Information Fusion Centre-- Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which allows formalised maritime domain, information-sharing between the two countries.<sup>85</sup> In May 2023, the Quad leader's met at the G7 Summit in Hiroshima and announced that the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), which shares near-real-time maritime domain data to maritime agencies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, will now be expanded to partners in the Indian Ocean Region via the IFC-IOR.<sup>86</sup> Australia is also a lead partner for India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and heads-up the 'Maritime Ecology' pillar, which helps to facilitate scientific collaboration and coordinate resources on reducing marine pollution, especially plastic waste.<sup>87</sup>

Naval cooperation with Japan, Indonesia and the UK also provides opportunities for Australia to strategically mobilise in the eastern Indian Ocean, as do various regional multilateral groups. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMDSF) are increasing their naval presence in the eastern IOR as part of their annual regional Indo-Pacific deployment. The JMDSF regularly take part in the Malabar and La Perouse exercises in the IOR, but are also building up bilateral maritime cooperation with India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives.<sup>88</sup> Australia and Japan have a lot of scope to deepen the cooperation between their navies in the eastern Indian Ocean. The 2023

Malabar Exercises were recently held off Australia's eastern seaboard – the next iteration Australia hosts could potentially be held off the coast of Western Australia.

The future development of the Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral partnership, which was formed in 2017 and has a focus on maritime security, can also significantly contribute to better maritime governance in the eastern IOR.<sup>89</sup> Australia could also potentially cooperate with the United Kingdom's HMS *Tamar* and sister ship HMS *Spey*, which are currently on a long-term/permanent deployment in the Indo-Pacific since September 2022. HMS *Tamar* has spent time in the Indian Ocean and visited India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands in January 2023 and Perth in June 2023.<sup>90</sup>

Australia is correct in maintaining a primary focus on the eastern IOR due to its limited naval resources, however, it does need to more explicitly acknowledge the entirety of the Indian Ocean in its strategic calculus. In line with Australia's Quad partners India, Japan and the United States, Canberra should reframe its conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific further to the west to East Africa. In the future, as Africa's eastern seaboard grows in economic importance with increased Australian investment,<sup>91</sup> the Indian Ocean will need to be viewed by Australia in its strategic entirety. Australia's IOR partners are already upping

their efforts in the Western IOR and whilst Australia has limited military, diplomatic and political resources, it can take some measures to contribute more to maintaining maritime security and governance in the region.<sup>92</sup>

It doesn't have to be a zero-sum calculation for Australia between having a focus on the entire Indian Ocean or more specifically on the eastern Indian Ocean.<sup>93</sup> There could be a gradient of Australian maritime interests with a greater focus on the east but with an increased but lesser focus on the western IOR. In 2009, Robert Kaplan opined that instead of maintaining maritime security across the entire Indian Ocean, a better tactic was cooperating across multiple regional alliances.<sup>94</sup> Australia can strategically mobilise its efforts in the western IOR by working closely with partners such as France and India.

France is a formidable naval power in the western Indian Ocean and despite Canberra's recently strained relationship with Paris, there is opportunity for closer maritime security cooperation in the region. France has the overseas local territories of Reunion and Mayotte and resident missions in Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles and Comoros.<sup>95</sup> France maintains a broad naval presence in the western Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean, with facilities on La Réunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.<sup>96</sup> This gives Australia the opportunity to occasionally deploy its ships to the region, even if just to signal an RAN presence and build up the level of cooperation and familiarity with regional partners.

The press conference following the 2023 Australia-France 2+2 mentioned a Reciprocal Access Agreement, "which will see greater access between Australia and France with our respective defence facilities."<sup>97</sup> The French Navy visits Fleet Base West near Perth regularly for maintenance and logistics, with the French SSN *Emeraude* and a surface ship exercising in late 2020 with an Australian submarine, maritime patrol aircraft and a frigate off the coast of Fremantle.<sup>98</sup> An Australia-France RAA would significantly help contribute to both countries operating more effectively across the enormous distance of the Indian Ocean.

Another way Australia can strategically mobilise in the western Indian Ocean is by building up the trilateral relationship with India and France that formed in 2020. The 2023 France-Australia 2+2 stated, "[t]he Ministers welcomed India's leading role in the region and reaffirmed their commitment to trilateral cooperation with India."<sup>99</sup> The development of a deeper coordinated relationship between New Delhi and Canberra in the eastern IOR, particularly reciprocal access to island bases, would open the potential for the two to engage with other nations in the western Indian Ocean.<sup>100</sup>

In 2018 at HMAS *Stirling*, south of Perth, French President Emmanuel Macron called for the creation of a new strategic alliance among France, India and Australia, and although much changed following the AUKUS announcement, the general idea still has much merit.<sup>101</sup> Australia's strategic Indian Ocean location and close bilateral relationships with both France and India make the trilateral partnership an attractive proposition to all parties.<sup>102</sup> The foreign ministers of the three countries met on the sidelines of the UNGA in late 2022,<sup>103</sup> and in 2023 are considering raising the trilateral partnership to a leader's-level grouping.<sup>104</sup> Working with France and India in the western Indian Ocean would give Australia the ability to deploy naval assets right across the Indian Ocean.

Australia can also reenergise IOR multilateral organisations and seek to join new institutions, particularly those with a maritime security focus. Australia as one of the key IOR powers should increase its engagement with IORA and seek to increase its political influence, while helping to generate more maritime capacity throughout the region. Australia could seek to revive the IORA to generate more awareness of maritime issues and build capacity and consensus.<sup>105</sup> Along with India and Indonesia, it is in Australia's best interests to help drive the association's agenda, particularly when relatively smaller western Indian Ocean states in East Africa and the Gulf are chairing IORA.

The Royal Australian Navy is a member-nation in Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) based out of Bahrain, particularly playing an integral role in CTF 150 (Maritime

Security Operations outside the Arabian Gulf). However, despite undertaking the commanding role on eight occasions and most recently in 2019, Australia no longer commands or sends RAN ships, while remaining a member of the CMF and sometimes embedding members in CTF150.<sup>106</sup> Australia is also a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which aims to increase maritime cooperation among the navies of littoral states of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) is also an important multilateral institution which seeks to ensure the correct management and conservation measures are enacted to ensure the sustainable and optimal utilisation of tuna. Australia could deepen its institutional arrangements with all IOR multilateral organisations.

In the western Indian Ocean, Australia could seek to join as an observing member to the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which consists of member states Comoros, France, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. China has been an observer since 2016 and Australia's strategic partners Japan and India have been observers since 2020. Joining the IOC would present Australia with an opportunity to expand its influence into the western Indian Ocean at a modest cost, for examples providing diplomatic and technical support to the organisation.<sup>107</sup> Australia could also potentially work with India through the IOC, to build up the capacity of the Regional Information Fusion Centres in Madagascar and Seychelles.<sup>108</sup>

Similarly in the eastern IOR, Australia should seek formal or informal engagement with BIMSTEC on an observer basis, as it is India's preferred vehicle for regional engagement and offers the best multilateral platform in the Bay of Bengal for sharing perspectives.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, Australia could actively participate in the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) as part of its engagement in the North-east Indian Ocean if the CSC chose to expand the number of observer countries.<sup>110</sup> All of these endeavours to expand Australian multilateral influence throughout the Indian Ocean are achievable and at a modest cost.



↑ Two U.S. Air Force B-2 Spirit Stealth Bombers, assigned to the 509th Bomb Wing, fly a Bomber Task Force mission July 18, 2022, alongside two Royal Australian Air Force F-35A Lightning II aircraft, over Royal Australia Air Force Base Curtin, Australia during Exercise Koolendong 2022.

## CHAPTER 4

# Leveraging the US-Australia Alliance in the Indian Ocean

### Australia can contribute to strengthening Indian Ocean maritime security by more effectively leveraging its alliance with the United States.

This final section focuses predominantly on the military aspects of maritime security in the Indian Ocean, although a greater US naval presence in Western Australia could also contribute to the provision on non-military aspects of maritime security in the IOR. The US has developed an increased Australian presence since it pivoted its focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. In November 2011, US President Barack Obama declared in a speech to the Australian parliament, “[t]he United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay”, the day after

announcing the initial rotation of 2,500 US Marines into the Northern Territory.<sup>111</sup> While the pivot faltered during the remainder of the Obama administration, Washington has maintained a reasonable level of focus on Australia.

The Indian Ocean remains a lower strategic priority for the US in the regions; however, the US Force Posture Initiative (USFPI) and recent AUKUS announcement could present an opportunity for Australia to leverage greater US engagement. The USFPI could conceivably contribute to the greater provision of maritime security

in the 5,000 km expanse from the Western Australian coast through to the island of Diego Garcia. Australia can essentially leverage its strategic geography and defence capabilities to promote greater regional US cooperation through the USFPI and provide greater deterrent posture and capability.<sup>112</sup>

Following the lead of its allies Australia and Japan, Washington broadened its conception of the region from the ‘Asia-Pacific’ to the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and thus included the Indian Ocean. In May 2018, US Pacific Command (PACOM) lengthened its name to become US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Despite the geographical shift in Washington’s policy focus, US priorities in the region remain firmly focused on the Western

Pacific.<sup>113</sup> The Biden Administration acknowledged the importance of the Indian Ocean in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, though the document only mentions the ocean once.<sup>114</sup> Despite this, the US continues to be a significant Indian Ocean power and maintains a strategic military base at Diego Garcia as well as US Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. Three US joint commands (AFRICOM, CENTCO, and INDOPACOM) are responsible for the Indian Ocean, which are covered by the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Fleets.<sup>115</sup> There have been calls for the consolidation into a single Indian Ocean fleet for a geographically contiguous maritime region that would more coherently address strategic needs.<sup>116</sup> In recent years, some high-level US Navy leaders have raised resurrecting the US First Fleet for the Indian Ocean and South Asian region.<sup>117</sup>

US strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean remain modest. Since WWII, US presence in the IOR has underwritten an alternative type of regional order to that of the Asia-Pacific, which has an established hub-and-spoke alliance system and developed security multilateralism.<sup>118</sup> In recent times, with the rise of great power rivalries, increased non-military security threat, and complex maritime security issues associated with climate change, the lack of a significant US presence has become more acute. However, US decision-makers are not likely to commit increasingly scarce defence resources to the Indian Ocean when significant military challenges in the Western Pacific continue to grow more intense.<sup>119</sup> United States strategy in the Indian Ocean region will likely place India in a central strategic position, however, the issue for Washington is how India can most successfully play its role in maintaining regional security.<sup>120</sup> It will be crucial to get the balance right between—Washington's support for building Indian military capability whilst also maintaining a US presence in the Indian Ocean.

Although India is seen as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean, it is still a work in progress in terms of naval capability and power projection.<sup>121</sup> And as Abhijit Singh maintains, "[I]f like Goldilocks, New Delhi seeks just the right balance of U.S. military presence in the Indian Ocean littorals: not too hard, not too soft, but just right."<sup>122</sup> In July 2023, the US

and India announced that they will establish a strategic dialogue on the Indian Ocean, which should help align their naval and maritime strategies.<sup>123</sup> The US and India can ensure greater maritime domain awareness and maritime security both logistically and operationally. The existing Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) allows US and Indian ships to take on critical supplies from one another's vessels.<sup>124</sup> The recent signing of a Master Ship Repair Agreement (MSRA) formalises an existing arrangement between the US Navy and a leading Indian defence shipbuilder.<sup>125</sup>

The operational coordination of the US and India in the Indian Ocean would largely fall on India's Eastern and Western Commands along with the USPACOM and the US Seventh Fleet. A joint operational framework can line-up security assistance, share MDA, arrange joint logistics, exchange staff liaisons and integrate forces to build interoperability and interchangeability.<sup>126</sup> The US has also been instrumental in helping to build India's maritime capacity in recent times. Over the past two decades, the US has planned to, supply – or has already supplied – India with P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, transport aircraft, MQ-9B UAVs, transport and ASW helicopters, all of which extend Indian naval capacity.<sup>127</sup> The US and India will also need to work with other Indian Ocean powers such as France, the UK and Australia. However, the US remains a crucial component in developing a concert of Indian Ocean maritime powers and a favourable balance of power.<sup>128</sup> In order to achieve this, the US, India and its Indian Ocean strategic partners will have to develop a workable model of burden-sharing. The United States must first be aware of the relevant threats and challenges in the IOR, and then pinpoint the areas in which it can play the most efficient and effective role.<sup>129</sup>

Following the Fall of Singapore in 1942, Fremantle in Western Australia became a crucial port for Allied ships and supported the second largest base for Allied submarines in the Pacific. Since the war, the US Navy has been a regular visitor to Perth; however United States and Australian cooperation in the Indian Ocean remains nascent. Recent Australia-US Ministerial Meeting (AUSMIN) meetings and Australian DWPs have

also reflected a lack of focus on US-Australia maritime cooperation in the IOR. At AUSMIN 2012, which was held in Perth, Australia and the United States agreed to undertake a cooperative study to explore opportunities in the long-term for enhanced cooperation with the US Navy at a range of locations in Australia, including HMAS *Stirling*.<sup>130</sup> Decisions on future options for increased US naval cooperation in Australia require further consideration by both governments. The joint statement recognised the "importance of the Indian Ocean and our combined focus on the global strategic significance of the region, Australia and the United States also agreed to continue exploring cooperation on Indian Ocean matters, reflecting our combined focus on the global strategic significance of the region."<sup>131</sup>

Over the previous decade, Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) have not focused heavily on the Indian Ocean. AUSMIN 2013 through to 2015 use the regional descriptor 'Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions', whilst AUSMIN 2017 and 2018 made no mention of the IOR. The AUSMIN 2019 recognised the "significance of South Asia and the Indian Ocean region" and committed to further collaboration "to support regional architecture, including IORA, regional infrastructure, and to deeper engagement with them on a broad range of security issues, including maritime security and oceans governance".<sup>132</sup> The AUSMIN 2020 statement "committed to pursue increased and regularized maritime cooperation in the region, as well as the Indian Ocean".<sup>133</sup> The AUSMIN 2021 and AUSMIN 2022 statements both had no mention of the Indian Ocean. Enhanced Maritime Cooperation (EMC) was introduced as a new initiative in 2021, seeking to increase the logistics and sustainment capabilities of US surface and subsurface vessels in Australia.<sup>134</sup> The AUSMIN 2023 statement doesn't mention the Indian Ocean, although in the context of force posture, RAAF Curtin and SRF-West are touched upon, as is the intention to rotate US Navy Maritime Patrol Aircraft in Australia to enhance MDA.<sup>135</sup>

Australia can better leverage the Alliance to encourage greater US investment and an increased maritime presence in the eastern

**Given the limited diplomatic, defence and security resources that IOR states possess and the nature of numerous emerging maritime threats, it is a good time to consider how Australia can best contribute to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.**

Indian Ocean. The intensification of the USFPI in recent years and the AUKUS announcement present opportunities for the United States in conjunction with Australia to develop a bigger footprint in Western Australia and the Indian Ocean. The Northern Territory Training Areas and Ranges Project is a \$747 million investment by USFPI to upgrade facilities at Robertson Barracks, Kangaroo Flats, Mt Bunday and the massive Bradshaw Field training area close to the WA border.<sup>136</sup> This could essentially help to close the strategic maritime gap between Darwin and Perth, and could also contribute to strengthening maritime security assets based in Western Australia. Geographically speaking, Western Australia and Northern Australia are now even more critical to the US and its allies in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Michael Green argues that the US needs access and “purchase on the Indian Ocean and so geographically, in technology, in terms of military operations and intelligence, the US is going to be more dependent on Australia.”<sup>137</sup> AUKUS Pillar I and Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-W), combined with an increased focus on Western Australia by the USFPI and Marine Rotational Forces – Darwin (MRF-D), can contribute to maritime and defence facilities between Darwin and Perth being more rapidly developed and upgraded in the near term.

AUKUS will entail a major \$8 billion upgrade and expansion of facilities at HMAS *Stirling*, including wharf upgrades and an expanded logistical capacity. SRF-West will host rotations of US and UK nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS *Stirling* from 2027 and it will be home to Australian nuclear-propelled Virginia class

submarines beginning from the early-2030s. Ashley Townshend argues, “HMAS *Stirling* will likely emerge as a full-spectrum trilateral submarine operating hub for everything from forward-based maintenance, repair, and overhaul to coordinated mission planning and sustainment.”<sup>138</sup> As one of three US submarine bases in the Indo-Pacific, along with Hawaii and Guam, SRF-W will likely see an increase in US surface fleet ships, including support vessels. SRF-West will play an increasing role in replenishing allied SSNs and developing closer working ties with US submarine tenders. The development of new operating locations along the western coast would facilitate greater Indian Ocean access and bolstering efforts to ease logistical challenges.<sup>139</sup> An Australian commitment to expand naval facilities in Darwin and Western Australia in order to enable Australian and partner operation, may be matched with a greater United States naval presence to support joint activities in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.<sup>140</sup>

In recent years, the USMC at MRF-D and particularly Talisman Sabre Exercises have been incrementally moving further west into Western Australia. Bradshaw Field Training Area has regularly hosted MRF-D and Talisman Sabre exercises and sits adjacent to the NT/WA border. However, in recent years exercises have moved into the Kimberley region of Western Australia. In July 2022, Exercise Koolendong conducted exercises at Curtin Air Base and Yampi Sound, involving B-2 bombers and the trialling of USMC Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO).<sup>141</sup> The EABO concept dovetails with Australia’s strategic location and US-Australia interoperability, though it

also has a heavy focus on littoral and maritime operations.<sup>142</sup> In this regard, the north-western Australian coastline provides an ideal entry point for the USMC to utilise Indo-Pacific littoral terrain for training. Following Talisman Sabre 23, MRF-D may run littoral manoeuvre profile with ship-to-shore connections in Western Australia. 13th Brigade Brigadier Brett Challoner said the recent exercises are indicative of bigger things to come, “That’s going to be part of a larger ... Defence push into the north-west over the next few years.”<sup>143</sup> Additionally, under the new [RAA] agreement, “Japanese troops could train at bases [with the ADF and MRF-D] in Darwin, Townsville or at bases in WA’s North West region.”<sup>144</sup>

Australia’s strategically located Cocos Islands could also play a role for the USMC operating through MRF-D and Talisman Sabre. Although the US Marines are stationed at MRF-D, periodic visits to Cocos Islands would elevate the United States’ Indian Ocean presence.<sup>145</sup> Australia, the United States and India could conceivably utilise their strategic island territories to complement one another operationally. Australia has utilised the US base at Diego Garcia in the past, particularly in support of Australian naval and air operations.<sup>146</sup> Australia-India-US collaboration across the Cocos Islands and Andaman and Nicobar Islands that focused on island defence and enhancing amphibious operations would increase interoperability, familiarity and the level of training on these strategically located island territories.<sup>147</sup> The United States could also support new training procedures among its partners, such as Indian and Australian forces that would make use of each other’s island territories.<sup>148</sup> The relatively low cost to Washington in operating from these island facilities is one of the few ways that leaders in New Delhi or Canberra have to incentivise continued US military engagement in the Indian Ocean.<sup>149</sup> This final section has focused predominantly on the military aspects of maritime security in the Indian Ocean, through a greater US naval presence which would contribute to the provision of greater eastern IOR basing and maritime resources.

## Conclusion

**Despite limited diplomatic, defence and security resources in the IOR, Australia can better contribute to the provision of military and non-military maritime security in the Indian Ocean.**

While the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia will still remain the primary area of Australian strategic maritime efforts, as one of the larger maritime powers in the Indian Ocean, it is in Australia's interests to contribute towards developing a more robust regional maritime security and governance architecture. As an increased Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean emerges as a primary concern for Australia and its partners, a response to that concern can also help to ameliorate other non-military maritime security issues. In an environment of limited maritime resources, Australia can better use its strategic partnerships and promote increased burden-sharing to strengthen Indian Ocean maritime security. By mobilising its key regional partnerships like India and France, and leveraging its most important ally the United States to also play an increased but targeted role, Australia can better contribute towards the provision of maritime security in the Indian Ocean.



↑ A four-ship formation of US Navy (USN) F/A-18A Hornets, in flight over Diego Garcia, British Indian Ocean Territory (IOT). The group is made up of aircraft from Strike Fighter Squadron 25 (VFA-25), Fist of the Fleet, (400 series), and Strike Fighter Squadron 113 (VFA-113), Stingers, (300 series). Image credit: National Archives Catalog

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↑ HMAS Brisbane's Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) returns to the ship while conducting boat operations in the East Australian Exercise Area.

# THE FUTURE OF THE AUSTRALIA - U.S. ALLIANCE

## THE ALLIANCE NETWORK PROGRAM

This Black Swan Strategy Paper has been developed as part of the Alliance Network Program. This program supported by the Embassy of the United States of America, is a multi-year public diplomacy, research and engagement activity designed to bring together influential leaders and emerging scholars currently specialising in regional security, economics or public policy to discuss the state of the Australia-United States Alliance and explore new areas of knowledge.

The first iteration of the program, developed by the Perth USAsia Centre under the direction of Professor Peter J Dean, took place on 13-14 February 2020 at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. The subsequent program in 2021, developed by the UWA Defence and Security Institute, held workshops in Perth (UWA DSI), Brisbane (Griffith Asia Institute), The University of Adelaide and Sydney (United States Studies Centre) between March and May 2021. The workshops were designed to ascertain Australian views of the Alliance relationship and were held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage a frank and open discussion. From each of these workshops, a small number of emerging and early career scholars were selected to undertake further policy work and travel to Washington DC to engage with US think tanks and policy makers. This Black Swan Strategy Paper represents a policy discussion from one of these emerging scholars.

### About the UWA Defence & Security Institute

The UWA Defence and Security Institute (DSI) is an initiative by The University of Western Australia (UWA). Hosted at UWA, the DSI unifies and focuses UWA's expertise in defence and security research, engagement and education. Defence and security provide the foundation of our nation's sovereignty. In an era of rapidly

evolving geopolitics, this critical area of national policy sits at the forefront of government and public debates. The DSI plays a central role in helping to develop Australia's sovereign defence capabilities in WA by working with local, state and federal governments, industry and business, research institutions and the community to help generate solutions towards a peaceful, prosperous and secure Australia and Indo-Pacific region.

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