

## **The Importance of the Indian Ocean to Australia and Maritime Strategic Cooperation**

CDRE S.C. Mayer, CSC and Bar, RAN

[The theme for the 2012 Galle Dialogue is '*Strategic Maritime Cooperation and partnerships to face the future with confidence.*']

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and thank you for inviting me to speak at the Galle Dialogue.

My Chief of Navy, Admiral Griggs, has already spoken today of the role of navies in collective prosperity – why the maritime environment is important to collective prosperity and how navies contribute to it. In speaking to you on the topic of the Indian Ocean's importance to Australia and of maritime strategic cooperation, I intend to follow on from Admiral Griggs' two key themes: the importance of the maritime environment to collective prosperity and the role of Navies in contributing to collective prosperity.

[SLIDE – Quote] I'll do this by looking in more detail at the Indian Ocean from an Australian perspective and then outlining for you the Australian Navy's cooperative activities in this ocean.

### **The Indian Ocean and Australia**

[SLIDE – maritime zones] My starting point for analysis of Australia and its Indian Ocean interests is the reality of Australian geography and maritime jurisdiction in this ocean. Australia has a coastline of 36,000km, roughly half of which lies on the Indian Ocean side. Our disparate offshore territories, exclusive economic zones and extended continental shelf claims result in a maritime area of 13 million square kilometres. The Australian search and rescue area of responsibility covers 52 million square kilometres, most of which lies in the Indian Ocean.

[SLIDE – Pacific zones] If we compare this with Australia's Eastern coast, you can appreciate how many adjoining claims exist on the Pacific side. While this makes our Indian Ocean claims seem less complicated, the challenge lies in some of the distances involved. [SLIDE – maritime zones

and CI] The closest of Australia's Indian Ocean territories, Christmas Island, lies 1400km from the nearest point on the Australian mainland. It is considerably closer to Jakarta than it is to Canberra. This geographical reality coupled with finite resources underpins one of the great challenges for Australia.

[SLIDE – Sea freight] Turning to trade, the relevance of the Indian Ocean to Australia is evident when examining sea freight by region of final destination. Over 50 percent of total Australian sea freight, by region of final destination, travels across the Indian Ocean or via straits connected to the Indian Ocean. Note that even some sea freight bound for the Americas is normally routed through the regional shipping hub of Singapore. I'll also highlight that while Australia is a net exporter of energy, it is a net importer of petroleum products and these come primarily via the Indian Ocean from Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

[SLIDE – SLOCs] The international relations scholar T.B. Millar referred to the Indian Ocean sea lines of communications (SLOCs) as the 'life line' of the Empire and of Australian trade with Britain and Western Europe. Our trading blocks have changed considerably since that comment was made, but the significance of Indian Ocean SLOCs has not.

[SLIDE] With this Australian geo-economic view as background, let me briefly touch on the myriad of other challenges resident in the Indian Ocean's environs. These include piracy, maritime terrorism, transnational crime, migration flows, regulation of fishing, environmental management, the conduct of marine scientific research, regional architecture and state based power competition. The last refers primarily to the United States, India and China – what has been described as the emerging strategic triangle; each with legitimate national interests within the region.

How does this background on the Indian Ocean in Australian consciousness translate in Australia's security calculus? I'll look at the practical dimension first.

[SLIDE – IO and commitments] Since the end of the Vietnam War, all of Australia's military engagements have been in the Indian Ocean: Kuwait and Iraq 1990-91, the Red Sea 1992-93, Somalia 1993, Arabian Gulf 1996-2003, East Timor 1999-2002, Iraq 2003-2008 and Afghanistan 2002

to the present. Non-combat commitments include disaster response following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004-05.

From a purely naval perspective, in the post war period the RAN has been operating in the Indian Ocean region since the late 70s. The Government's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 was to deploy a carrier battle group into the North West Indian Ocean. This developed into a regular commitment, with Australian ships throughout the early 1980s often integrating into US carrier battle groups on GONZO station. Our warships were frequently engaged in tracking Soviet naval movements.

Following a brief hiatus in the late 80s, the RAN has been in the Arabian Gulf or Arabian Sea almost continuously since the first Gulf War of 1990 and a ship remains in the area today. These naval deployments include regional engagement activities during transit to and from the primary operating areas.

[SLIDE – FBW] A good portion of these deployments are from Australian warships based at Fleet Base West near Perth, Western Australia. I make this remark because this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Government's decision to establish the 'two ocean navy' policy, effectively dividing the navy's major surface combatants between Perth and Sydney as an integral part of the then Defence of Australia doctrine.

In fact, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean had been recognised well prior to this formal policy. The aforementioned deployments in the Indian Ocean in the 70s had to be supported by some means. Hence, the announcement that a forward operating base be established on Garden Island, WA occurred in 1972. HMAS *Stirling* opened officially in 1978 and the first surface combatant, the destroyer escort HMAS *Swan*, was home ported in 1984.

While these are distinctly naval observations, Australian Defence strategic and policy documents since the 70s have outlined the importance of the Indian Ocean in strategic terms. The most robust of these was the 2009 white paper, our most recent. It stated 'Over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning.'

[SLIDE – MINDEF quote] Last year, the Minister for Defence determined that given the changing strategic circumstances in the Indian Ocean, the location of Australia's natural resources and the United States' intent to shift focus to the Asia-Pacific, the time was appropriate to review the posture of the Australian Defence Force.

The independent Force Posture Review team made a number of observations relating to the Indian ocean:

- A competitive multipolar order is emerging with the shift of economic and strategic power to Asia, and the Global Economic Crisis has accelerated this shift;
- India is gradually moving towards great power status; its security policies remain South Asia-centric but will place an increasing priority on the Indian Ocean and the wider Asia-Pacific;
- Securing sea lines of communication and energy supplies will be a strategic driver for both competition and cooperation in the Indian Ocean region to 2030, and Australia's defence posture will need to place greater emphasis on the Indian Ocean, as indicated in the 2009 Defence White Paper;
- The authors also noted the strategic significance of the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.

So, Australia is increasingly looking to the Indian Ocean as a region of critical strategic importance and is committed to working multilaterally to address challenges that threaten sea lines of communication (SLOC). We view the security of Indian Ocean SLOCs as central to maintaining regional stability, energy security and trade across the Indian Ocean region.

Admiral Griggs has talked of the immutable and pervasive dependency upon proper functioning of global maritime trading system, which is pivotal to our continued prosperity. From the multitude of challenges that I've outlined, it's evident that the security of that system is beyond the capacity of any single nation - **cooperation and collaboration is the key.**

Let me now turn to Australia's cooperative activities in the region.

## **Australian Navy's cooperative activities**

With this in mind, Australia is a steadfast partner in a number of Indian Ocean related activities and forums.

Firstly, Australia is an active contributor to multinational efforts to address maritime security challenges, particularly piracy, around the Horn of Africa. Our contribution occurs at all levels. At the strategic level, we are actively involved in the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia. As a result of our involvement in this forum, and others, the Australian government hosted an International Counter-Piracy Conference in Perth this year. It applied lessons learnt from the Southeast Asian experience to combating piracy off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Guinea. In particular, discussions focused on the importance of regional information sharing and cooperation, and the building of robust and flexible legal frameworks to facilitate the prosecution of suspected pirates.

[SLIDE] At the operational level, Australia's commitment in the Middle East has evolved since 2008. We regularly contribute to coalition rotations of a Commander and staff in Combined Task Force 150, headquartered in Bahrain.

[SLIDE] While CTF 150 is responsible for broader maritime security throughout the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman, CTF 151 focuses on counter piracy off the Horn of Africa. At the tactical level, the Australian government decided in 2009 to dual role RAN ships between maritime security and counter piracy, allowing flexibility in the employment of these platforms. As I mentioned earlier, a ship – currently HMAS *Anzac* – remains on task in the area today.

Most here would agree that multilateral security architecture in the Indian Ocean region remains underdeveloped compared to the Asia-Pacific. Australia supports the development of robust Indian Ocean security architecture.

[SLIDE – IONS] The RAN is a keen supporter of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Initiated by India in 2008, this forum aims to increase maritime understanding and co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive

forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues and to generate a flow of information between naval professionals and possibly agreements on the way ahead. IONS is developing along similar lines to that of the Australian sponsored Western Pacific Naval Symposium.

At the 3rd IONS Conclave of Chiefs held South Africa in April, our Chief of Navy undertook for the RAN to lead on the development of a paper that draws on the respective experience of IONS members and the various groupings against piracy.

Let me highlight that Australia will host the 4<sup>th</sup> Conclave of Chiefs in Perth in Mar 14. It's appropriate at this point to touch upon a non-Defence related forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). This association appears to be gathering new found vigour and an appetite to delve into security issues, particularly broader aspects of maritime security. Australia welcomes this evolution within IOR-ARC. Particularly, since Australia will assume Chairmanship of IOR-ARC in 2014.

So, just to emphasise, Australia will hold concurrent Chairs of both IOR-ARC and IONS during 2014. We are keen to capitalise on these leadership roles as an opportunity to strengthen and broaden the scope of Indian Ocean security architecture to the benefit of all stakeholders.

[SLIDE – ADMM-Plus] I want to touch on a final forum and that is the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). While this is not a specifically Indian Ocean centric organisation, it includes Indian Ocean rim countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar. Importantly, the 'Plus' countries brings key Indian Ocean stakeholders such as Australia, India, China and the US to the table. The ADMM-Plus offers a valuable framework for practical engagement in areas of regional security, particularly maritime security and counter terrorism. Australia has pursued keenly multilateral cooperation during our tenure as co-chair of the ADMM-Plus Experts Working Group on maritime security.

Of course, our participation in important exchanges of ideas such as the Galle Dialogue, India's Andaman and Nicobar Island based activity 'Milan,' and more general bilateral passage exercises with Indian Ocean nations also represents Australian commitment to this significant region.

[SLIDE – warships] Ladies and gentlemen, my aim was to provide you with a brief insight into Australian thinking on the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, and to outline Australia's maritime strategic commitment to this region.

The Indian Ocean has always been important to Australia, from the earliest discovery of our land to the present. The pervasive nature of the maritime global trading system, the key energy routes along Indian Ocean sea lines of communications, which underpins the shift in economic weight from West to East, all point to a renewed rise in the strategic importance of this region.

In Defence strategy and policy, Australia is considering carefully the changing strategic nature of the Indian Ocean region. Concurrently, Australia takes a multi layered and multilateral approach to maritime cooperation in the region, including an ongoing commitment to maritime security operations in the NW Indian Ocean and participation in a myriad of forums.

I hope that this brief foray into Australia's role in the Indian Ocean has whet your appetite for more information. On that note, I'll be happy to take your questions during follow on discussion.

Approx 2100 words (20 mins).