

New Challenges for Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean – An Australian Perspective

Sam Bateman* Anthony Bergin** and Russell Trood***

Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong, Australia, and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, ** Director of Research, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Canberra, * Adjunct Professor of Defence and Security, US Studies Centre, University of Sydney*

The Indian Ocean region is growing in strategic importance. It is facing the risks of growing strategic competition, particularly between China and India. However, the region tends to be neglected by Australia despite extensive interests in the region and the possibility of threats to Australia's security emerging from the region, including the risks of intrastate conflict, terrorism, smuggling in all its forms, and illegal fishing. Climate change, sea-level rise and natural disasters are other non-traditional security threats evident in the region. The northwest of Australia is particularly exposed to these challenges to maritime security and requires more attention in Australia's security planning. More broadly, there is a range of other initiatives that Australia might take to engage more constructively in the region and help to enhance regional maritime security and oceans management.

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Over 25 years ago, one widely read book on the Indian Ocean region (Dowdy and Trood 1985) described it as a “strategic arena.” Many of the specific issues that shaped the geopolitics of the region at that time have changed – the Iran-Iraq War, the strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the secession movement in Eritrea among others, no longer command the attention of either governments or analysts. Yet in the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean is hardly more peaceful. As Ian Clark noted in the final chapter of that 1985 book, the “Indian Ocean region manifests various symptoms and sources of insecurity, ... many in an especially virulent form.” At the same time, he argued that “the persistent sources of conflict derive from problems of economic distribution (of wealth), ethnic and religious divisions,

* Corresponding author. Email: sbateman@uow.edu.au

secessionism, and internal political instabilities.” The consequence was the “rather dismal conclusion” that all the turmoil was a “present and foreseeable characteristic of the Indian Ocean landscape.” (Clark 1985, pp.527f)

Ian Clark’s analysis has proved remarkably prescient. Some of the issues may be different, but the underlying sources of regional instability and insecurity have barely changed. Much of region’s politics continues to be shaped by outside (that is to say, non littoral powers) poverty and underdevelopment persist, local regional conflicts continue, issues of nuclear proliferation remain on the regional political agenda and structures of regional and sub-regional cooperation have struggled to prosper. In addition new issues have emerged to compound the many challenges faced by regional actors, whether government or non-government – Islamic sponsored terrorism, piracy, the excessive exploitation of natural resources and growing incidents of transnational crime. It was a reflection of the range and depth of the complex security, economic and social issues that continue define the Indian Ocean as a key global strategic arena that in 2009 led Robert Kaplan to argue in a highly regarded analysis that the region will be centre stage for the security challenges of the twenty-first century. As a key littoral country Australia cannot not help but be affected by these challenges.

1. Australia’s Interests in the Indian Ocean

The likely impact of regional instability on Australia’s national interests was recognised decades ago. In June 1984 the then Australian foreign minister, Bill Hayden, explained that the region was undergoing rapid political, economic and social change to the degree that “too much is going on (and) too much is in prospect for it to languish as a token” area of Australian foreign policy (Dowdy and Trood 1985, p. 356). Notwithstanding Hayden’s commitment to assign a higher priority to the region, the record of engagement of the Hawke Government, of which he was a member, and of subsequent governments, has been uneven at best. Australian policy has more typically been cast around bilateral interests than through the wider prism of regionalism and multilateral cooperation.

More recently however, there has been a significant revival of interest. In July 2010, for instance, Stephen Smith, the then Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, observed in a talk in Perth that the security of the waters of the Indian Ocean “goes to the

heart of Australia's national interests" (Smith 2010, p. 2). This reflected the views in Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper that the "Indian Ocean will have greater strategic significance in the period to 2030" (Australian Government 2009, p. 37). Hence, Australia's "Defence planners will need to focus increasingly on the operating conditions and demands of this region" (Australian Government 2009, p. 52).

There can be little doubt that Australia should be giving greater attention to the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest ocean. Australia is a major stakeholder in affairs of the Indian Ocean region (IOR), including its security and stability. Australia has a larger area of maritime jurisdiction than any other Indian Ocean country (Bateman and Bergin 2010, p. 12). This is nearly six million square kilometres, or about eighty per cent of the continental land mass of Australia, and much of it is continental shelf rich in hydrocarbon reserves.

Australia's greatest challenges with protecting borders, offshore sovereignty and sovereign rights are off its west coast, particularly the northwest. This is a consequence of the region's proximity to "jumping off spots" for illegal access into Australia from the north. Australia has extensive offshore interests in the Indian Ocean with strategically important island territories, vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and hugely valuable offshore oil and gas reserves off the northwest coast. Some of these reserves are 500 kilometres offshore. Among Australia's Indian Ocean island territories, the Cocos and Keeling islands, in particular, have great strategic value, although currently little use is made of them.

Despite these extensive interests, Australia has seriously neglected the IOR. Australia often forgets that it is a three-ocean country. It rediscovers the Indian Ocean at roughly fifteen year intervals: in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the Soviet Union moved into Afghanistan, and again in the mid-1990s when Australia took a leading role in attempting to build cooperation across the IOR. Australia is now rediscovering the Indian Ocean with the present Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade declaring in a speech in November 2010 that "now Australia must look west, to the great challenges and opportunities that now present themselves across the Indian Ocean region" (Rudd 2010).

2. Strategic Environment

From Australia's perspective many of the key strategic trends in the Indian Ocean region are disconcerting. The region is becoming both more militarised and more-nuclearised (Bateman and Bergin 2010, p. 25) and as was the case 25 years ago, although in contemporary times largely for concerns over energy security, extra-regional powers are seeking to maintain and extend their presence in the region which, as in the past, is greatly complicating the overall regional strategic outlook.

More specifically, geo-political differences are becoming very evident between the rising powers of India and China. Both India and China feel that they are being strategically contained by the other. India aspires to dominate the region by enlarging its security perimeter. In the expansive views of some Indian strategic thinkers, this extends "from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and from the coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia" (Berlin 2010, p. 55). Indian strategists generally have opposed the presence of great powers in the Indian Ocean, which they privately consider "India's lake" (Townshend 2010, p. 2).

Meanwhile China, whose interests in the region are far from recent (Trood, 1985) is strongly cultivating its regional economic and strategic links in the IOR, including the establishment of a support network for possible naval operations (Kostecka 2010). In Beijing's view, China's strategic situation would be seriously impaired should India achieve the goal of enlarging its security perimeter and achieving a position of dominance in the IOR (Berlin 2010, p. 61).

At present, the United States dominates the IOR strategically and militarily. Its principal concerns are maintaining the security of its oil supplies from the Middle East and countering terrorism and Muslim extremism. Potentially the United States has the leverage to act as a broker between India and China should their bilateral relationship deteriorate. Yet the future will almost certainly see a decline in American influence in the region as the United States struggles to maintain its defence presence in the face of a poorly performing economy, as well as its legitimacy among the peoples of the region, many of whom are Muslim. As Kaplan has argued (2010, p. 278), the plain truth is "the gradual loss of the Indian and western Pacific oceans as veritable American military lakes".

These trends mean that the strategic environment Australia faces in the IOR is increasingly uncertain. Australia will have an opportunity to do something about this through being co-chair with Malaysia of the maritime security experts working group established by the ASEAN Plus Eight Defence Ministers' meeting (ADMM+8). This forum might be steered towards consideration of the situation in the Indian Ocean with possible dialogue between the U.S., China and India in a politically neutral forum (Townshend 2010, p. 3).

3. Maritime Security Threats in the Indian Ocean

Maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean range from the traditional through to the non-traditional. The following might be identified from an Australian perspective:

- The threat of major intra-state conflict in which Australia became involved leading to possible raids or air attacks against Australia.
- Terrorist attack against vulnerable points in the region, particularly offshore oil and gas installations and other mining infrastructure.
- Non-traditional security threats, including the smuggling of people, arms and drugs, illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and maritime natural disasters.

Major Intra-State Conflict

Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper states that "after careful examination, it is the Government's view that it would be premature to judge that war among states, including the major powers, has been eliminated as a feature of the international system" (Australian Government 2009, p. 22), and that "Shows of force by rising powers are likely to become more common as their military capabilities expand" (Australian Government 2009, p. 22),. India and China would be the main powers of concern in the latter judgment.

Any conflict between India and China would likely be partly played out in the Indian Ocean. Should Australia become involved, it would open up the possibility of attacks on the vulnerable northwest coast. Australia's energy and mineral exports from the northwest to China could become a valid strategic target for India in its conflict with China. While this scenario is an extremely remote possibility, it should not be assumed that Australia would be supportive of India. India's hegemonic aspirations in the Indian Ocean could lead to rash actions contrary to Australia's interests that might jeopardise Australia's trade with China.

Terrorist Attack

Maritime terrorist attacks are a threat across the IOR due to the presence of extremist groups, including in neighbouring countries to Australia's north. The terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008 showed the risks of terrorist attack from the sea if coastal waters are not secure. Attacks on offshore facilities have occurred in the past. Three offshore Iraqi oil terminals were attacked in the Persian Gulf in 2003 by explosive-laden speedboats.

Terrorists contemplating a terrorist attack against Australia would recognise that the offshore oil and gas facilities in the northwest of Australia are a significant national vulnerability that is not protected as well as they should be. Arrangements to protect these facilities, port terminals and pipelines are major considerations for our national security planning. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) and other security forces should be in a position to respond at short notice to a terrorist threat to offshore and coastal infrastructure. However, due to the location of our existing Defence bases, the ADF is not in this position at present.

Non-Traditional Security Threats

While traditional security risks are evident in the IOR with the tensions and conflict in the Middle East and Indian sub-continent, the region also faces extensive non-traditional security threats. These include climate change and possible rising sea levels, transnational crimes (particularly piracy, drug and arms trafficking, and people smuggling), food shortages, disease and famine, IUU fishing, and maritime natural hazards, such as tsunamis, cyclones and floods. All these threats have a significant maritime dimension and pose major risks in the northwest of Australia in particular. Through 2009 and 2010, there has been a marked increase in the numbers of asylum seekers trying to enter Australia by sea, mostly across the Timor Sea and the northwest Indian Ocean.

IUU fishing is a serious problem in the Indian Ocean, including off the Australia's northwest coast (Bateman and Bergin 2010, p. 29). Increased demand and the depletion of fish stocks elsewhere in the world have led to more fishing in the Indian Ocean and an increasing presence of fishing vessels from outside of the region. The involvement of these vessels is facilitated largely because there is no effective regime for regional fisheries

management. The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) is ineffective as a regional fisheries management organisation.

Marine natural hazards arise through climate change, tropical storms, tsunamis and other severe oceanic conditions. Southeast Asia and other parts of the IOR are prone to these hazards, and scientific findings suggest that the intensity and frequency of disasters arising from these hazards is increasing.

4. The Vulnerable Northwest

Although often overlooked in Australia's defence planning, the northwest of the continent has always been Australia's most exposed flank. During World War II, the Japanese repeatedly bombed towns along the northwest coast as far south as Exmouth Gulf. These air raids against the northwest have lessons for defence planning through to the present day. They show the area's vulnerability as a consequence of its exposure to the Indian Ocean and its proximity to major centres to the north and northwest from which raids or attacks against Australia might be launched.

The vulnerability of the northwest was appreciated in Australia's defence planning from the 1970s through to the early 1990s when Australia was pursuing an active policy of defence self-reliance, and the so-called Defence of Australia (DOA) scenarios provided the basis for planning. The Dibb Review of 1986 supported the notion of credible contingencies based on assessments of regional capabilities to attack Australia. These were contingencies at the lower levels of conflict mainly the threat of raids and air attacks against northern settlements and offshore islands, rather than actual lodgements of enemy forces on Australian territory (Australian Government 1986, p. 53).

This focus on minor attacks as the more credible contingencies was maintained in Australian defence planning through until early this century. However, a more favourable regional security environment, specifically a more mature relationship with Indonesia, led to some watering down of the risks of low level conflict. The 2000 Defence White Paper considered that even minor attacks against Australia were improbable but that "circumstances might change in ways that make the prospect less unlikely" (Australian Government 2000, p. 10).

These past assessments reflected a view that the northwest of the continent was remote with relatively little critical national infrastructure. All that has changed. Offshore oil and gas developments on the continental shelf off northwestern Australia are now major strategic interests for Australia. They are central to Australia's future prosperity and security, but despite their vulnerability, their importance seems underappreciated in national strategic planning.

Western Australia is turning into a regional and global energy hub. Karratha and Port Hedland are being developed as "Pilbara cities", and new ports and other towns are planned for the northwest (WA Government 2009). These vital elements of critical national infrastructure are located on Australia's strategically exposed western flank a long distance from existing ADF main bases near Darwin and Perth. Despite the assessments in the 2009 Defence White Paper of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, Australia's defence facilities to support operations in the region are limited.

The 'bare' air bases at Learmonth (about 1200 kilometres from Perth) and Curtin (about 1000 kilometres from Darwin) are rarely activated. They were developed over three decades ago to provide support for maritime, air and land operations in DOA scenarios popular in defence planning at the time. Operations of the Army Reserve regional force surveillance in the Pilbara and the Kimberley regions have been reduced due to budgetary restrictions (Dodd 2009). There is not a naval base between Perth and Darwin. It is over 3000 kilometres from Perth to Darwin, and the ADF could be slow in responding to an offshore contingency in the Pilbara region.

This decline in defence activity in the west suggests some lack of appreciation in Canberra of just what is occurring off the West coast. A long-term policy objective for Australia should now be to increase the Defence presence in the northwest. This would help demonstrate Australia's interest in the Indian Ocean and support the development plans of the Australian and Western Australian governments for new ports and towns in the west and northwest.

There will be arguments against the development of new Defence facilities in the northwest on grounds of costs and the ability of the ADF to deploy rapidly if necessary (Bateman and Bergin 2010, p. 60). A new base is contrary to the current policy of reducing the size and costs of the Defence estate. However, that was a consideration for military bases and facilities established many years ago, mainly in the southeast of the continent, in different strategic circumstances. It fails to recognise the greater strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and the growing national infrastructure in a region that was previously considered of relatively little strategic interest.

Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper gave no attention to developments in the northwest and the implications for our defence planning. The paper states that the primary obligation of the Australian Defence Force is "to deter and defeat attacks on Australia" (Australian Government 2009, p. 58). It goes on to state that this "entails a fundamentally maritime strategy, for which Australia requires forces that can operate with decisive effect throughout the northern maritime and littoral approaches to Australia" (Australian Government 2009, p. 59). However, it fails to acknowledge the vulnerabilities in the northwest. There is no reference to the strategic and economic importance of the oil and gas developments offshore in the northwest or to mining developments in the west more generally.

5. Regional Maritime Initiatives

The strong political framework on which to build the necessary cooperation to meet the maritime security challenges of the IOR is lacking at present. The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) has not been effective although it may be revitalised in 2011 when India and Australia assume the positions of Chair and Vice-Chair of the association respectively (Bateman 2010, pp. 28 – 29). The ADMM+8 maritime experts working group is another potential forum in which maritime cooperation might be discussed.

Prospective initiatives that Australia might take in the maritime domain of the IOR include ones in the areas of maritime security cooperation, fisheries management, maritime safety, marine scientific research, people smuggling by sea, and the mitigation of marine natural hazards. These initiatives might be launched on a region-wide basis, at a sub-regional level, or bilaterally depending on the particular issue.

It has been claimed that the ‘troubled maritime environment’ of the IOR requires ‘greater naval military presence and surveillance’ (Rao 2010, p. 134). India has promoted the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to foster the necessary cooperation between navies and coast guards in the IOR. However, extra-regional countries with significant interests in the region were not invited to participate (Cordner 2010, p.79). The IONS deserves support from Australia provided it is an inclusive forum and has a clear sense of purpose. Closer to home, Australia might initiate regular trilateral talks with Indonesia and Timor Leste on the maritime security challenges of the Timor Sea.

Australia might take a lead in promoting oceans management in the IOR. In addition to common interests in economic development, security and trade, the Indian Ocean itself is a major common interest of IOR coastal and island states. Maritime issues are a compelling common interest. The ocean has rich fish stocks, but they are seriously under-managed and largely exploited by non-Indian Ocean countries. Arrangements for managing the ocean and its resources are under-developed in comparison with the Pacific Ocean.

Fisheries management should be a priority area for regional engagement. Australia has relevant expertise and could invest more effort in ensuring that cooperative fisheries management arrangements in the Indian Ocean are effective. Australia might also assist with building the capacity of selected regional countries for fisheries management, and EEZ management more generally. This would be particularly useful for countries of East Africa and some of the island countries that have large EEZs and valuable fish stocks that are mainly exploited at present by foreign fishing interests.

The Indian Ocean has several unique characteristics. Unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, it is enclosed on three sides by land masses. As a consequence, oceanic currents in the Indian Ocean reverse during the year in a way that does not occur in the other major oceans. The strong through-flow of water from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean through the Indonesian archipelago is another factor which has a strong impact on oceanographic conditions in the latter ocean. Unfortunately however, the thorough marine scientific research to analyse these factors fully and to assess their implications is not available.

The Indian Ocean is the most under-researched of all the world's oceans. Political differences have inhibited marine scientific research in the past. There is a close link between oceanographic conditions and regional weather patterns. Better oceanographic knowledge would markedly improve climate research with benefits for all IOR countries, including providing the ability to predict severe weather events, such as cyclones and periods of drought. With better oceanographic knowledge of the Indian Ocean, it may have been possible to predict the disastrous floods in Pakistan thus providing the opportunity for better preparations to be made in advance to mitigate the consequences of this appalling natural disaster.

Improving marine scientific research in the region is essentially a cooperative activity and there is much scope for action in this regard. There is scope for Australian leadership in fostering marine scientific research in the IOR, especially in the eastern part of the ocean.

6. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The need for Australia's defence and foreign policies to give greater attention to the Indian Ocean is accentuated by the developing strategic uncertainties of that ocean, growing trade in with the IOR, the enormous economic and strategic significance of Australia's mining, oil and gas developments along the northwest coast, and the expansion of the vital national infrastructure in that area.

It is likely that surveillance and enforcement in the Indian Ocean will require much greater effort from Australia in the future. The likelihood of increased IUU fishing requiring policing on the high seas, more illegal fishing incursions into Australian waters, larger fishing boats, and the possibility of economic refugees, even coming perhaps directly from Africa helped along by favourable weather, are all considerations. Oil and gas rigs will be located further out to sea on the extended continental shelf in the Indian Ocean. Increased shipping traffic and other maritime activity in the IOR may mean a higher number of search and rescue incidents in Australia's large search and rescue region in the Indian Ocean.

To summarise, the following are some policy initiatives that Australia might take to meet growing maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean:

- As a broad strategic objective, Australia should increase its strategic presence in the IOR through more proactive regional relations and a wide spectrum of increased activity in the region.
- Australia might propose that maritime security and oceans management issues might be included on the agenda of future meetings of the IOR-ARC
- Maritime security in the IOR might also be discussed at the ADMM+8 maritime security experts working group.
- Australia could host a future Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), provided the symposium is an inclusive gathering and has a clear sense of purpose.
- Australia should make a greater effort to ensure that cooperative fisheries management arrangements in the Indian Ocean are effective.
- Assistance in building local capacity for fisheries management, and EEZ management more generally, should be an important component of Australia's regional aid programs.
- Australia should take action to promote cooperative marine scientific research in the IOR and to enhance the ability of the region to predict and mitigate the impact of maritime natural disasters.
- Most importantly, the ADF should plan to markedly increase its presence along the west coast of Australia between Perth and Darwin.

These are just some of the initiatives that Australia might take to enhance maritime security and oceans management in the IOR, and to engage constructively in the region. They exploit the common interest of Indian Ocean coastal and island states in the maritime environment, its resources and security. While there is growing concern for the future stability of the region, the maritime domain offers the potential for important “building blocks” for the establishment of the regional cooperation and dialogue that would contribute to maritime security in the region.

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