

# **Submission for the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Indian Ocean**

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## **SUMMARY**

The Indian Ocean region remains one of Australia's and the world's most important maritime transmission belts. Today, the rising economies of the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean have made the region of growing importance to the world economy, especially with the rise of India. Australia's long-history of engagement with the Indian Ocean demonstrates that as a nation, we must better understand this region and play a more constructive role in ensuring its stability and prosperity in line with our long-term national interests.

### **Why the Indian Ocean is of military historical importance to Australia.**

- The Indian Ocean Region, the third largest body of water in the world, was the arena of several key military campaigns during both world wars, particularly World War II. In Australia, public memory and commemorative attention continues to be entirely dominated by the great battles and campaigns of the Atlantic, Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Pacific. Despite the deployment of thousands of Australian military personnel, ships and aircraft in the Indian Ocean theatre this rarely gets more than a passing mention in the history books.

### **WORLD WAR I:**

1. During World War I (1914-1918) all 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Imperial Force (AIF) troop convoys transited the Indian Ocean enroute to the Middle East, Asia Minor and Europe. In doing so, the first overseas destination they visited was the island of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, which was for the vast majority of the troops their first time overseas.
2. In November 1914, the legendary German cruiser SMS *Emden* was sunk by the RAN cruiser HMAS *Sydney* at the Battle of Cocos Islands.
3. In 1915, the RAN light cruiser HMAS *Pioneer* participated in the successful allied naval blockade against the German cruiser SMS *Konigsberg*. This was in support of the broader allied mission during the German Eastern Africa campaign in what is today modern Tanzania.

4. Hundreds of Australians also served in the Mesopotamia campaign (1914-1918), particularly Australia's nascent air force: the Australian Flying Corps.

## **WORLD WAR II:**

1. Throughout the World War II the Axis powers deployed over 70 warships and submarines to the Indian Ocean, and through the Indian Ocean to the Australian south and east coasts. This was a hard fought and protracted campaign with the loss of an estimated 380 allied merchant ships, comprising some 1.7 million tons of shipping, to Axis raiders and submarines.
2. During World War II, 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF troop convoys carrying the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Divisions transited the Indian Ocean when deploying to and from the Middle East. Again, for many on those convoys, Ceylon was the first overseas destination experienced by Australian troops.
3. In August 1940, the light cruiser *HMAS Hobart* reinforced and then evacuated the beleaguered British garrison at the port of Berbera in British Somaliland: the first British-colony to fall to the Axis powers in World War II.
4. The sloop *HMAS Yarra* participated in the allied intervention in Iraq in May 1941.
5. Subsequently, in August-September 1941 *HMAS Yarra* and the armed merchant cruiser *HMAS Kanimbla* participated in the Anglo-Soviet intervention in Iran.
6. In March 1942, *HMAS Yarra* was sunk by the Japanese 55 miles south of Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.
7. From 1942 to 1945, the Japanese conducted dozens of air raids against Western Australia's northern towns, ports and airfields. These came as far southwest as Exmouth Gulf.
8. In April 1942, the destroyers *HMAS Vampire*, *Norman*, *Nizam* and *Napier* were attached to the British Eastern Fleet. They participated in the Battle of Ceylon, which was the Japanese Indian Ocean offensive conducted by the same naval strike force led by Admiral Nagumo that had attacked Pearl Harbour and then Darwin. During the air battle, while escorting the light British aircraft carrier *HMS Hermes*, *HMAS Vampire* was sunk with the loss of eight sailors off Ceylon's eastern seaboard. *HMS Hermes* was also sunk.
9. As part of the Australian commitment to defending Ceylon, two brigades from the 6<sup>th</sup> Division (comprising 6000 troops) were deployed during April-July 1942 to reinforce the island and meet an expected Japanese invasion.
  - a. The deployment of Australian troops in Ceylon was a consequence of the well-known strategic dispute during the return of the Australian 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions

from the Middle East for the direct defence of Australia. As the collapse of the allies in South East Asia worsened, Winston Churchill attempted to divert the convoys to defend Burma, which at the time was being overrun by the Japanese. Fearing a repeat of the Singapore debacle, which had led to the loss of the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division, PM John Curtin decided to compromise with Churchill and dispatched two Australian infantry brigades to garrison southwest Ceylon.

- b. After the war, Churchill referred to the Japanese Indian Ocean offensive as “The most dangerous moment.” He feared the fall of Ceylon and the near loss of the British Eastern Fleet would have turned the tide of the war against the Allies from a German and Japanese link-up in the Indian Ocean.
10. In May 1942, HMAS *Norman* and *Nizam* covered the allied invasion of Madagascar, at the time a Vichy French colony. The operation was code-named IRONCLAD and was reportedly the first major amphibious landing since the Gallipoli campaign. The capture of Madagascar was necessary to secure the strategically important allied sea lanes that supplied the Commonwealth forces in North Africa, enabled lend/lease equipment to be supplied to the Soviet Union through the Persian Corridor, and equipment to China via India, Ceylon and Burma.
11. Throughout World War II, RAAF Catalina “double-sunrise” flights were regularly conducted between Fremantle and Koggala in Ceylon. This vitally important strategic air link over the Indian Ocean linked the South West Pacific Area and South East Asia Commands (the latter headquartered in Ceylon).
12. Between mid-1942 and 1945 up to 12 RAN corvettes were assigned to the British Eastern Fleet to conduct convoy escort and anti-submarine duties throughout the Indian Ocean.
13. Around 2000 Australian servicemen, primarily airmen, served in India during World War II. Some participated in the Burma campaign, including the legendary battles at Imphal and Kohima, during the decisive stages in the late 1944 Battle for India.
14. From 1942 onwards, the destroyers HMAS *Quality* and *Queenborough* deployed on convoy protection and anti-submarine duties in the Indian Ocean.
15. Similarly, other than undertaking convoy duties in the Indian Ocean, from January-May 1944, HMAS *Nizam*, *Napier*, *Nepal*, *Norman*, *Quiberon*, *Quickmatch* and *Quadrant* (operating out of Ceylon) supported allied operations in the Bay of Bengal. This was principally to cover the allied invasion of Burma and aircraft-carrier raids on Japanese military installations in Sumatra and Java.
16. The Fremantle naval base (supported by an advanced facility at Exmouth Gulf) was the largest submarine base in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the utility and strategic advantage of using Western Australia to launch submarine operations against the Japanese was glaringly evident. According to Australian naval historian, David

Creed: "Submarines stationed at Fremantle were predominantly American. These boats sank more Japanese oil tankers than all other United States submarines combined." He added: "In addition, two individual submarines based on Fremantle each sank more enemy shipping than any other allied submarine in any theatre of war."

17. Using Western Australia-based airfields the RAAF conducted long-range air raids against Japanese military installations throughout the Indonesian archipelago.
18. Altogether, at least three Australian warships were sunk in the Indian Ocean during World War II: HMAS *Yarra* being the first, followed by HMAS *Sydney* and then HMAS *Vampire*.
19. Some 1,000 Australian war graves are spread around the Indian Ocean region

### **Why the Indian Ocean region is important today.**

- As Australia's only Indian Ocean state, Western Australia continues to provide a prime strategic location in projecting Australia's expanding Indian Ocean interests. The Indian Ocean is now considered the most important and geo-politically contested waterway in the world with the bulk of the world's seaborne transport in energy plying its waters travelling to the economies of Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Today, the Indian Ocean region is in the midst of a major geo-political struggle, often referred to as a 'Great Game', which has seen a decline in Western influence in tandem with the rise of regional and extra-regional powers that are aggressively vying for influence.
- Seven of the Indian Ocean's littoral states are middle powers in at least regional terms: Australia, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Africa, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Five extra-regional great powers have a strategic presence in the region: the US, UK, France, Japan and China.
- The presence and interests of so many of the world's major powers means that strategic competition cannot be avoided, as seen by China competing with the US and India; Iran pitched against the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia; and continued strategic tension between Pakistan and India.
- These tensions have resulted in, for example, the proliferation of ballistic missile capabilities and the expansion and modernisation of the region's naval forces. Indian Ocean regional powers possessing and deploying ballistic missile technology include Iran, India, Israel, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In addition, India and Pakistan both possess nuclear weapons in a cold-war type standoff, and a potential nuclear weapons competition is emerging between Iran and Israel/Saudi Arabia.
- The Indian Ocean region is also highly unstable in other ways. It is characterised by strategic and military threats from failed states, terrorism and insurgency, and by

maritime crimes such as piracy and trafficking in arms, narcotics and people. The 2011 Failed States Index indicates that 11 out of the world's 20 most unstable states are located in the Indian Ocean region.

- The centrality of the Indian Ocean as a “maritime commons” cannot be emphasised enough. More than 80 per cent of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits Indian Ocean choke points; with 40 per cent passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 per cent through the Strait of Malacca, 30 per cent around the Cape of Good Hope; and 8 per cent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait.

- Another potential threat to the region's stability is food security, more specifically, over-exploitation of fisheries. The Indian Ocean is facing an alarming trend in fisheries exploitation. The consequences of over-fishing, mostly a result of unregulated activity by countries outside the region, could eventually have serious consequences for littoral states that depend heavily on the sea to feed their expanding populations.
- Australia's strategic, diplomatic and commercial relations throughout the Indian Ocean region have grown markedly in recent years.
- According to DFAT, there are currently over 300 Australian companies active on the African continent, 300 in the Middle East Gulf states and nearly 1500 Australian firms operating in India alone.
- Some 11 of Australia's 17 bilateral counter-terrorism MOUs have been signed with Indian Ocean-region countries. Australia's engagement in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars again entailed significant ADF logistic support across the Indian Ocean. Both before and after these wars the ADF has been required to mount longstanding maritime operations in the ocean directly, particularly through the RAN's participation in sanctions enforcement, terrorist interdiction, anti-piracy and counter-people smuggling operations. The ADF also continues to support Australia's widening economic and diplomatic ties with Africa, bilateral defence co-operation with Pakistan, and nascent but expanding bilateral strategic linkages with India.
- Participation in Indian Ocean multilateral strategic security forums is increasingly important to Australia's national interests. These forums include the Indian Ocean Region-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). The IOR-ARC is the premier regional forum and comprises 19 member states. Australia will chair the IOR-ARC in 2013-15 and in 2014 will chair and provide the secretariat for the IONS.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Australia should hold an annual commemorative event in Canberra to provide national recognition to hitherto largely unrecognised Australian contributions in the Battle for the Indian Ocean during World War II.
  - a. This could be undertaken where a specific monument is built in Canberra (or Perth) dedicated to the contribution and sacrifice of Australian servicemen in Indian Ocean campaigns.
  - b. Endorse the creation of a battle honour for Australian units who served in the Indian Ocean.
2. Australia should take the lead in fostering the creation of an annual "Indian Ocean Region Defence Ministers Forum". This would emulate the annual ASEAN Defence

Ministers Forum and serve to strengthen regional stability through all-inclusive strategic, defence and security co-operation between all Indian Ocean region states.

3. Establish a framework for strategic co-operation in the Indian Ocean between Australia, France and South Africa, the three countries that share significant interests in the southern Indian Ocean. Australia can develop a trans-Indian Ocean partnership with France and South Africa by intensifying and broadening co-operation in areas such as scientific cooperation between the Australian, French and South African Antarctic divisions, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, fisheries management and environmental protection, hydrography, track one and two dialogues and military-to-military linkages.
4. Establishing a small joint military headquarters in Perth on the ADF's northern command model in Darwin. This would provide appropriate strategic emphasis on Australia's Indian Ocean interests and enable effective and better informed local co-ordination of contingency and other planning than can be provided centrally by Joint Operations Command in Canberra. It would also better manage civil-military linkages with the WA Government and its agencies, and with Border Protection Command (also centred far away in Canberra). This command could easily be located in the under-utilised facilities at Leeuwin Barracks in Fremantle. If titled "Indian Ocean Command" (IOCOM), rather than say "Western Command", this initiative would better represent national interests and better leverage Western Australia's strategic location as Australia's only Indian Ocean state - and the only Australian state from which the ADF can directly mount operations in all the Southeast Asia, Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean regions.
  - a. IOCOM would be similar in size and function to the Darwin-based NORCOM, but would focus on military diplomacy and an exercise programmes that engage with Indian Ocean countries.
  - b. An initial step would be to conduct a study into the feasibility of establishing a joint operational (one-star command) headquarters located in WA.
5. Conduct a feasibility study with a view to basing more of the surface fleet at Fleet Base West. This would enable the ADF to increase its leverage of Western Australia's strategic location in responding to Indo-Pacific contingencies.
6. To enhance strategic discourse in Western Australia, through improving the strategic culture needed to sustain such debate, relocate a component of a Department of Defence agency or sub-agency to Perth. This would also better capitalise on the complementarities WA's strategic location. The initial step would involve a feasibility study into options.