

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN

**Submission from Auriol Weigold, Visiting Fellow, International Studies,
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Biodata:

I am a researcher and writer on aspects of the Australia-India bilateral relationship, and on the Indian Ocean Region in terms of politics and security and history.

As a Fellow at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre I undertook a project on Menzies' and Nehru's divergent foreign policy objectives and their long-term effect on the Australia-India relationship, and am now working on former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's Indian Ocean defence and foreign policies.

I am an Associate of Future Directions International, a Perth-based regional strategic group, an invited member of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra, a South Asian Studies Association Committee member, a member of the Institute of International Affairs, and an editor of and contributor to South Asia Masala, an ANU weblog supported by the Australia India Institute at the University of Melbourne.

Publications include many journal articles including most recently "Engagement versus neglect: Australia in the Indian Ocean, 1960-2000", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol 7 No 1, June 2011, and conference papers, most recently "Australia and India: cooperation ahead on Indian Ocean Security?" at the *The Asian Century: Security, Sustainability and Society*, funded by the Australia India Institute and hosted by the University of Calcutta.

Book publications are *Churchill, Roosevelt and India: Propaganda During World War II* (2008, Routledge NY and 2009, Taylor & Francis/ Routledge, New Delhi) and, with Brian Stoddart, *Australia and India: Bridging Different Worlds* (2011, Readworthy Publications, New Delhi).

Submission

This brief submission will address strategic development and proposals in and around Australia's Indian Ocean coastline and the choke points to our north, and notions of regional security.

Inquiry Committee members are well aware of Australia's engagement in the Indian Ocean and its expanding importance in our strategic thinking. As a basis for consideration, we have the longest stretch of coastline adjacent to the Indian Ocean of any littoral state, the second most powerful navy after India, and a long history of engagement in the Indian Ocean region.

Australia has important maritime possession in the Indian Ocean, especially the Cocos and Keeling Islands and Christmas Island, and a regional responsibility towards the vital sea lines of communication, alleviating potential threats to shipping access across the Ocean, and natural disaster responsibilities.

The Cocos Islands, their potential use as an Australian regional base or an Australian-US defence base, and the possible effect of such plan options on the region, are the subject of this submission.

Australia's current initiatives

Australia's Defence Minister Stephen Smith's Force Posture Review announced in June 2011 added a renewed and clearly enunciated interest in the security of the Australian Indian Ocean coastline. The review will be undertaken by the Defence Department and overseen by an expert panel that will also consider population and population spread in the Pilbara region and beyond as more intense oil, gas and mineral exploration and infrastructure develop.

This timely Review is intended to provide strategic context for the next Defence White Paper, due in two years and, of immediate interest in this submission, it will consider

- (a) the rise of the Indian Ocean rim as a region of global significance,
- (b) the growth of military power in the Asia Pacific and, of prime importance
- (c) energy security in and around Australia offshore installations and approaches to them from the North and North West

Of great importance, the Defence Minister's Review will consider a future strategic role for the Cocos and Christmas Islands.

This submission argues against any future escalation of an Australian strategic role for the Cocos Islands that is not a regionally acceptable use of our sovereign territory. It argues against the basing of American drone surveillance devices there – or on other Australian islands.

A cautious Australian approach proposed

As announced, the first American contingent has arrived in the Northern Territory (4 Apr 2012) and will engage as deemed appropriate by defence strategists in the Indo-Pacific oceans and region.

Any escalation that included the Cocos Islands would be seen in some quarters as an unacceptable militarization of the Indian Ocean.

There is evidence to support that argument: an additional announcement that proposed a joint US-Australia arrangement on the Cocos in the days following President Obama's visit to Australia in November 2012, and reporting that the then Foreign Minister had welcomed the proposal that also suggested India might join in a tripartite strategic arrangement, was immediately rejected by India, and provoked protests by China.

While Indian involvement is not an issue at this time, reactions should be remembered: the Defence Minister said in an interview with the *Canberra Times* on 10 December 2011 that Australia was not urging a trilateral dialogue "the reporting was wrong". A similar aspect of the story appeared in *The Hindu* (8 Dec 2011), and the tripartite idea, however inaccurately reported, was rejected by *The Times of India*, quoting government sources, on 1 and 2 December.

While India has a strategic but uncommitted relationship with the US, and a less developed defence relationship with Australia, the Indian grounds for rejection were that it would not want to jeopardize its sometime fragile relationship with China by such open provocation.

It has also frequently and cogently been argued that Australia should not take unnecessary strategic steps that cause further hostile reactions from China and (while not appearing weak), should balance its approach to its allies and to its region.

In the interests of cooperative security of the Indo-Pacific, Australia might promote discussion, including with China and the US, on a 'concert of powers' approach to the management of the sea lines of communication, utilising its status as a middle power – surrounded by three great powers.

As a middle power with options for a more independent foreign policy that would encourage negotiation on ocean interests over acceptance of its main ally's priorities, Australia could avoid future description as 'deputy sheriff' and associated regional mistrust.

Mistrust in the Indian Ocean

Mistrust in the Indian Ocean is demonstrated in a number of ways that include

China's acquisition of its so-called 'string of pearls' to ensure its ongoing presence and India's similar moves to gain influence in areas crucial to its energy security – also China's key objectives.

India is rapidly increasing its navy's capacities and capabilities, and has made unpopular incursions into the South China Sea. Into this mix the was added in January this year President Obama's Defence Strategy Review, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defence*, (5 Jan 2012) in which it was stated that "we will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific Region ...".

The title of the Review does not suggest a 'concert of powers' approach in Australia's region but rather traditional American exceptionalism.

The United States has characterised the Indian Ocean as global commons: what then is US policy towards it? Australia and India have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) the US has not. (http://www.un.org/depts/low/convention_agreement/convention_overview_convention.htm)

Three further questions emerge:

- Does the US strategic community see India as its partner in managing the global commons?
- Is India's expansion of its navy, and determination to remain the predominant power in the Indian Ocean, signaling a tilt at sea control rather than sea denial?
- How might China interpret the global commons concept - as allowing freedom for it to establish overt bases in addition to its aid, economic and infrastructure initiatives across the Indian Ocean littoral and inland states?

There is also a degree of mistrust between Australia and India over respective Indian Ocean intentions and, by way of contrast, India has a strategic by uncommitted relationship with the US, as said, far short of Australia's commitment.

Cocos Islands as a shared military base

The *Washington Post's* speculation that the US and Australia are planning to expand military ties to include use of the Cocos Islands as a launch pad for its unmanned surveillance flights, (27 Mar 2012), raise the level of mistrust and risk an interpretation that the Indian Ocean is being militarised by 'Western' allies.

The Defence Minister responded that any discussion with the US on use of the Cocos Islands was an issue for the future. The Government made various statements and political commentators expressed a variety of views – none of which put the issue to bed and will not alleviate regional concerns, expressed recently (as mentioned), following President Obama's late 2011 visit to Australia and the string of joint defence announcements then made.

An escalation in the US – Australia alliance to include Australian sovereign marine territory that may be seen to dominate the entry to and exit from the choke points to our north is disturbing and an incentive to increase mistrust. The choke points include the Straits of Malacca, the Lombok and other Indonesian Straits, and underline risks of militarising the Indian Ocean.

I am sure that the Inquiry Committee will have maps that illustrate the point I make here.

Add, notionally, as India's assets remain uncommitted, its defence bases on its Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal's Andaman Sea – that create effectively a defensive arc – and will not alleviate China's concerns.

If the Washing Post speculation becomes a reality then, as noted by Australian observers, an explicit guarantee that any US reinforcement of its Indian Ocean presence is designed to meet the regions many 'non-conventional security challenges', and not militarisation should be offered.

Cocos Islands utilised in Australia's national interest

Australian strategists will, as part of Mr Smith's Force Posture Review, re-examine the issues and consequences surrounding an upgrade of infrastructure on the Cocos Islands, clarifying the intention to develop it for our own uses as a positive asset rather than regionally-disturbing base.

The Islands' role might then be regionally cooperative surveillance, close access to natural disasters and search and rescue operations and, importantly, early intelligence on possible threats to the country's \$200 billion hydrocarbon industry with its on- and off-shore vulnerabilities.

Intrusion of US drone technologies and threats to escalate their use have aroused hostility and damaged their relations with Pakistan, an Indian Ocean state closely allied with China. Basing US drones, whatever their stated purpose on Australia's maritime territories, would not be in Australia's national interest.

Thank you for considering my submission.

5 April 2012