



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital
and External Territories report:

The strategic importance of Australia's
Indian Ocean Territories

May 2018

Recommendation 1:

In light of the changing dynamics in the Indian Ocean region, the Committee recommends that the Australian Government refer an inquiry that considers Australia's Indian Ocean Territories and its engagement in the broader Indian Ocean region to this Committee, at least every five years.

Noted. The Australian Government will refer inquiries to the Committee, as appropriate.

Recommendation 2:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government strengthen its engagement with Australia's Indo-Pacific partners, through existing regional forums and alliances that Australia currently participates in, particularly through pursuing opportunities for bilateral and multilateral defence activities and training exercises in the Indian Ocean region.

Agreed. Strengthening Australia's engagement with Indo-Pacific partners to promote an open, inclusive and prosperous region is a key Australian Government priority. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper provides a framework for Australia's international engagement for the next 10 years, with a strong focus on engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Regional engagement is pursued through regional forums such as the East Asia Summit, the Association of South East Asian Nations, the Pacific Islands Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Australia will deepen bilateral and multilateral engagement through the United States-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and the Australia-Japan-India Trilateral.

The 2016 Defence White Paper confirms that defence engagement is important to building international partnerships and commits to more regular bilateral and multinational engagements and exercises. Australia recently deployed its inaugural joint task group, Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017, to promote security and stability of the region through engagement, training and capacity building activities.

The Department of Defence continues to strengthen existing multilateral engagement with Australia's Indo-Pacific partners, including through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Australia's bilateral defence relationships with partners in the Indian Ocean region continue to develop, consistent with commitments in the 2016 Defence White Paper. The Australian Government will continue to pursue relevant opportunities for bilateral and multilateral defence activities and training exercises in the Indian Ocean region.

The Department of Home Affairs and Australian Border Force will continue to work with Indo-Pacific partners developing regional responses, capacity building programmes and joint operations to strengthen cooperation in maritime law enforcement operations throughout the region.

Recommendation 3

Noting the receptiveness and support of local communities, the Committee recommends that the Australian Government consider increased Defence and Border Protection activities, such as surveillance, naval patrols, a military reserve or cadet unit, and potential training exercises on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to demonstrate Australia's commitment to the islands. Consideration should also be given to how locally engaged employment opportunities can be provided as part of these activities.

Agreed in part. The Australian Government recognises safeguarding Australia's maritime approaches, offshore territories and borders is essential for Australia's national security. Through investment in the Department of Defence and the Department of Home Affairs' maritime and surveillance capabilities, the Australian Government maintains awareness of activities in its maritime domain, enabling early detection of potential threats to border security and appropriate responses to deter and defeat such threats.

The Australian Government has increased the Department of Defence and Department of Home Affairs' presence in the vicinity of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in recent years. Significant Australian Defence Force activities in Australia's north and north-west maritime domain include Operation RESOLUTE and Exercises KAKADU, PITCH BLACK and NORTHERN SHIELD.

Three Australian Army Regional Force Surveillance Units, located in North Queensland, Northern Territory and the Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia, meet Australia's strategic and operational needs. These Reserve-staff Units conduct long range reconnaissance and surveillance patrols in sparsely populated and remote regions of northern Australia and protect against illegal smuggling and fishing. Their capability relies on significant support from the wider Army and larger nearby regional centres to provide management, logistics and training. A more permanent Australian Defence Force presence through a reserve capability in the Indian Ocean Territories is unlikely to deliver enhanced situational awareness in our maritime domain.

The Department of Home Affairs employs a small contingent of locally engaged non-ongoing Australian Border Force Officers on Christmas Island who deliver functions on behalf of the Australian Border Force, including clearance of goods and people. Due to the limited demand for these functions, the Department of Home Affairs has no plans to increase this cohort.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that, as part of the project to upgrade the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Airport runway, the Australian Government ensures that extensive consultation is undertaken with all stakeholders, including Australian Government agencies, commercial partners, and the local communities. Care should be taken to fully assess and manage concerns relating to water catchment and storage issues, including for firefighting purposes near the airport.

Agreed. The Australian Government, through the Department of Defence, will consult with all stakeholders, including Australian Government agencies, commercial partners and the local communities about the runway upgrade. Consultation will align with the Community Engagement Framework being developed by the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities to guide Australian Government engagement with the Indian Ocean Territories community.

Recommendation 5:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government consult with relevant stakeholders including Australian Government agencies, Christmas Island businesses and the local community in developing medium and long term solutions for the Christmas Island wharf to ensure that strategic, economic and social objectives can be met.

Agreed. The Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities is finalising the detailed design of a replacement wharf crane and mooring system at Christmas Island. Significant users of this port infrastructure were consulted during the design process.

Recommendation 6:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government engage with local communities to ensure that any proposals for works, funding and planning in the Indian Ocean Territories result in direct benefits to the local communities and, where possible, draw on local suppliers of goods and services.

Agreed. The Australian Government will work with local communities to ensure benefits of works are maximised. Subject to Commonwealth Procurement Rules, and where the appropriate skills are available, local suppliers will be engaged to provide goods and services.

Recommendation 7:

The Committee recommends any Australian Government departments wishing to do work in the Indian Ocean Territories should do so in genuine partnership with local communities. Departments should undertake extensive consultation processes and respond to the needs of the local community. Government departments should discuss their proposed consultation methods with key stakeholders on the islands to ensure those processes are effective and genuinely inclusive.

Agreed. The Australian Government consults with and works alongside local businesses and communities to achieve positive economic and social outcomes for communities. The Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities is developing the Indian Ocean Territories Community Engagement Framework to guide Australian Government engagement with the community.