

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

INQUIRY INTO THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORIES

Background

I made a submission and gave evidence in relation to the previous inquiry into the governance of the Indian Ocean Territories (IOT). While this current inquiry is welcome I still have concerns that the Australian Government does not have a clearly articulated vision for the IOT. Such a statement or vision would provide a whole of government direction for the IOT and give confidence to the various Government agencies working in that space to link their operational plans to that shared vision.

As I said in my previous submission, an Australian Government statement on the future of the IOT is also essential for its long-term economic future. This applies in relation to considering the strategic importance of the IOT. A vibrant and secure IOT economy makes for a strategically secure IOT. It sends a signal to countries with an interest in the region that the Australian Government is confident in its management of these territories.

Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Territories

The IOT are of national strategic importance to Australia. Each Territory contains a National Park, wetland reserves listed under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) and are habitats for migratory and land-based species of international significance. Seabirds and crabs are just two examples of these. Christmas Island has a phosphate mine with a medium-term future.

The IOT are relatively new Territories, each with a unique history and culture. The United Nations resolution made following the 1984 Act of Self-Determination of the Cocos Malay community noted the actions by the Australian Government to ensure the community on Cocos (Keeling) Islands enjoys the same benefits as the rest of the Australian community. It also noted the Australian Government's assurances that the unique cultural identity, heritage and traditions of the Cocos community would be maintained. To this end the Australian Government agreed to maintain mainland Australian standards in a Memorandum of Understanding in 1991. While no such agreement was reached in relation to Christmas Island the policy of maintaining conditions and standards in both territories with those of comparable mainland communities seems to have been followed. It is important to be aware of these types of commitments when considering the strategic importance of the IOT.

The IOT have a strategic location in the Indian Ocean. They extend Australia's marine interests beyond the continental shelf of the Australian mainland and the associated exclusive Economic Zone. This is highlighted in the 2016 Defence White Paper. While I am sure the Committee will have reviewed the White Paper any submission in relation to the strategic importance of the IOT should have

reference to that document.

The 2016 Defence White Paper has three basic objectives:

1. A secure, resilient Australia.
2. A secure nearer region, encompassing maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific.
3. A stable Indo-Pacific region.

In relation to objective three, the IOT would figure prominently in relation to a number of preparedness initiatives in the White Paper. Of note is "Defence will also need to be prepared to help protect Australia's offshore resource extraction activities, maintain Australia's sovereignty over our offshore territories and Exclusive Economic Zone and fulfil our international search and rescue obligations".

The Government's shipbuilding plans for surface warships, including offshore patrol vessels and frigates means that the refuelling facilities particularly on Christmas Island would be of strategic importance. Similarly, the port infrastructure on both islands would be important to these assets.

In addition, the enhanced maritime aviation capability noted in the White Paper could make both Cocos and Christmas airports important, although the air refuelling plans make this less so. Despite this, the location of Cocos and Christmas are important in relation to aircraft emergencies, humanitarian, or search and rescue operations in the region.

Navy and Border Force vessels and aircraft have utilised these infrastructure assets on both Christmas and Cocos in the past.

Broader infrastructure on Christmas Island in particular is substantial and can cater for numbers of military personnel as well as being a staging post for any humanitarian efforts. The detention centre itself is capable of housing a large number of people and the utility improvements made to cater for that facility can be seamlessly brought on line. Cocos does not have the same infrastructure capability however the former quarantine station has been used in the past for a number of operational activities. The Cocos runway was resurfaced a few years ago however it was not strengthened in that upgrade. Heavier aircraft can only make very infrequent landings for fear of damage to the surface.

While I do not have any direct knowledge of the changing regional security environment, the press reports I have seen indicate some changes in focus for our near neighbours. Clearly the 2016 Defence White Paper wants to see a stable Indo-Pacific region. The Australian Government's interests in the IOT should be strengthened, not reduced. As I have stated before, a strong local economy is one part of this equation.

The IOT communities have both suffered and been advantaged by the various initiatives of the Australian Government over the years I have been involved with these Territories. Clearly the Christmas Island community was not ready, and was not assisted to be ready for the results of the detention centre activities during its construction and in the years of significant activity. There was an economic

boom on island, but at a social cost. It is unlikely that the Australian Government will embark on another detention centre-like development in the near future. However if it does, then the the lessons of the past should be heeded and a proper social impact assessment made beforehand.

Finally, the IOT is a unique part of Australia and occupies a strategic location close to our northern neighbours. In my opinion it is time to think seriously about the long-term future of these islands.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Committee and I would be happy to discuss any of the points I have raised.

Stephen Clay