



Submission No 19

Inquiry into Australia's Maritime Strategy

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INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY

I wish to make a submission to the Committee that questions the strategic relevance of a defensive maritime strategy in an age of hybrid wars and amorphous, transnational threats. In my view the great conceptual weakness of the Defence of Australia (DOA) doctrine and its associated maritime strategy is that it is based on a notion of threat that takes little account of the declining strategic relevance of geography and the proliferation of non-military, non-state challenges to security.

The sea-air gap to the north, or Australia's 'moat' as it is sometimes called, conjures up the image of a protective barrier that can be defended by military force and encourages us to believe that Australia "is a secure country thanks to our geography."¹ But this is a dangerous illusion in a world of technological profusion, protean crime, epidemic diseases, illegal migration and stateless enemies as the Bali bombing and other terrorist outrages demonstrate.

The maritime strategy that underpins DOA is a maritime strategy in name only. A true maritime strategy, based on the use of substantial naval power to control major sea lines of communication, or to contain continental powers, is well beyond Australia's capability. However, the real problem with the maritime strategy is that the so-called sea-air gap is not a gap at all. It is an archipelago occupied by numerous islands of varying importance, size and population where any conceivable military operation would require the effective use of land forces including the means to transport and sustain them.

In committing so much of the defence budget to the Navy and Air Force at the expense of the Army, the architects of our strategic doctrine pursued a policy that severely weakened the Army's capacity for force projection in the mistaken belief that air and naval power would suffice. This flawed policy was maintained despite a dramatic increase in the Army's operational tempo during the 1990s and in the face of professional, military advice. It was only towards the end of the decade that Army was permitted to develop a limited capacity for littoral operations. But as East Timor showed, this shift was too little and too late.

If the events of the past decade are any guide, ADF deployments beyond the sea-air gap will increase rather than diminish as coalitions of the willing are formed and re-constituted for a variety of tasks unrelated to the planning scenarios that inform DOA. The 2000 White Paper belatedly acknowledges that the maritime strategy includes "a vital and central role for the land forces."² But there has been no serious attempt to flesh out this new role or articulate in convincing fashion how the ADF's repeated overseas deployments are consistent with a defensive maritime strategy. And there is little sign of a willingness to make changes to a force structure that is still heavily reliant on expensive sea and air assets that cannot be easily adapted to contingencies other than DOA, despite claims to the contrary.

It is my belief that the ADF must possess a greater capacity for strategic reach and off-shore deployments beyond the confines of our immediate neighbourhood in support of Australia's wider security interests.

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¹ A phrase that appears in the 2000 White Paper along with the equally contestable statement that "the benefits of our strategic geography are immutable." *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, October 2000, p.23.

² *Ibid*, p.47.