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Naval Studies Group Primer No. 2 Maritime Strategy

By Dr John Reeve*

This primer describes the nature of maritime strategies, including the broader components such as the civil maritime sector, industry and workforce.

The nature of a maritime strategy

Strategy as a word is often employed loosely, invoking military theory, planning or command: issues which of course can overlap. Strategy is about the making of choices involving the calculation of risks conditioned by contexts. Maritime strategy can be defined as 'The comprehensive direction of all aspects of national power to achieve strategic goals by exercising some degree of control at sea.'[1] For the nation state these goals are essentially the protection of territory (terrestrial and maritime), population, resources, prosperity and interests. Today maritime strategy is pursued within the dominant international geostrategic environment. The oceans are the key zone of geopolitical competition. 85 per cent of global commerce depends on sea-based trade and 90 per cent of global data is carried by undersea cables.[2] These shaping forces are centred in the Indo-Pacific region.

True maritime powers are born as much as made. Their geography is complemented by creative integration of commercial, industrial, financial, administrative, human and naval resources, all facilitated by liberal societies and consensual governments.[3] Australia is a natural maritime power. With an insular geography in a predominantly maritime region, it has deep water ports, ready access to three oceans and pivotal sea lanes, and a defensive position at vast distance over blue water. Its maritime territory, one of the world's largest with extensive natural resources, is greater than its

1 *Australian Maritime Doctrine. RAN Doctrine 1*, second edition, 2010, 199.
2 Jones, B D, *To Rule the Waves*, 4-5.
3 Till, *Seapower. A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 110ff.

landward. It is territorially satisfied with no land frontier to defend. Its economy is highly dependent upon seaborne trade.[4]

According to Rear Admiral Richard Hill, in his 1986 treatise *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, a medium maritime power falls between the insufficiency of a small power and the strategic self-sufficiency of a superpower. Australia can be placed in this category. As such, it needs sovereign control and prioritises territorial integrity, political independence, and vital interests such as trade and access. The strategic toolbox of a medium maritime power includes balance of power diplomacy, strategic deterrence, and alliance with a superpower to prevent domination by another – the Australia, New Zealand, United States Treaty (ANZUS), for example, in Australia's case.[5] With limited military force, and having to calculate risk and security with care, a medium power should assiduously study geopolitics, history, strategy, and the military capabilities of others.

The components of a maritime strategy are diverse. The American naval historian and geo-strategist, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, famously propagated an analysis of sea power as dependent upon a variety of geographical, demographic, cultural and political factors.[6] Professor Geoffrey Till, in our own day, has elucidated a modern navy's requirements and its relationship to the society it serves.[7] A naval policy must be adopted at the political level and the public persuaded to resource it. It involves shipbuilding capacity, access to technology, a wider defence industrial base to produce systems, sensors and weapons, merchant shipping and seamen for logistical support and strategic lift, an infrastructure of ports, dockyards and bases, and civilian and naval personnel to design, produce, and equip the fleet and to maintain, supply, and man it, as well as run an entire military organisation. The navy, which serves with other joint forces as the sharp end of a maritime strategy, is the outcome of a partnership between government, industry, science, the military, and the civil maritime community. A navy contributes to an economy not simply in protecting seaborne trade, but in promoting industrial growth and technological development. Australians have never really appreciated the material and human requirements of a capable and independent navy.[8]

Naval force design should be strategically driven. This includes hedging against the unforeseen, for it is rare to get (as the United States Navy (USN) did during World War II) the war one expects. Hence navies traditionally lean towards having a balanced fleet. The alternative, a 'focused' fleet, is necessarily limited in capabilities and therefore in the situations it can address.[9] A balanced fleet maximises options within the available resources. This is particularly necessary for a highly maritime power such as Australia, especially given strategic volatility and uncertainty. The needs of a medium power place an extra premium on balance and flexibility. Great powers, more able to absorb strategic shocks, can afford specialisations such as multiple aircraft carriers and massed submarine forces. A medium power needs a range of capabilities, aimed at force multiplication, employing technological leverage, and adaptable to different levels of conflict. A medium power also needs two navies in one:

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4 Australian Naval Institute and UNSW Naval Studies Group, *Protecting Australian Maritime Trade.*

5 Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, 10-14, 20-4, 67-9, 157-8.

6 Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*.

7 Till, *How to Grow a Navy. The Development of Maritime Power.*

8 Goldrick, 'A Fleet not a Navy: Some Thoughts on the Themes'; Stevens, D (ed.), *The Royal Australian Navy. A History*, 295-6.

9 Till, *How to Grow a Navy. The Development of Maritime Power*, 233.

a force tailored to national needs while able to co-operate with a major ally.[10] Interoperable systems and complementary capabilities are valuable commodities in an alliance context.

History, theory and the elements of a maritime strategy

Strategic theory can be valuable in strategic analysis and discussion. The best strategic theory distils the hard-won lessons of historical experience, gives them order, and provides a general guide to strategic thought and action. As the great military theorist Carl von Clausewitz perceived, theory provides no detailed manual for particular situations. It ensures that one need not start afresh and repeat past errors. It enables the identification of key issues in the present.[11] In the early 2000s, for example, the tactics employed in sanction enforcement by the Maritime Interception Force in the North Arabian Gulf under Royal Australian Navy (RAN) commanders were heavily influenced by the British blockade tactics against France two centuries earlier.[12] Theory provides a shared language amongst military professionals. It can also be invaluable in discussing strategic issues with politicians and explaining them to civilians. Maritime strategic theory is particularly useful given the very different operational environment of the sea and its interaction with changing technology. Modern naval warfare arrived at the beginning of the sixteenth century with the advent of the modern warship: a strike platform with trans-oceanic reach, which it remains today. It created the world of global geopolitics in which we still live. The sea remains the element covering most of the earth's surface, still providing unrivalled strategic mobility and commercial communication as the most efficient means of heavy transport. Such fundamentals give historical experience and strategic theory enduring relevance.

The classical maritime strategic theorists, Mahan and the British historian Sir Julian Corbett, who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have renewed relevance today with the acceleration of geopolitical rivalries and the build-up of conventional blue water naval forces. Technological change can alter the context of maritime strategy, as when mines, torpedoes and submarines complicated littoral operations for navies prior to 1914. But strategic continuity interacts with change.

Mahan, in a series of books from 1890 onwards, created a discourse about sea power, its nature, social context, and historical influence. As an advocate for a blue water US Navy, he emphasised battle fleet strategy leading to command of the sea. A man of the high imperial era, he espoused the accumulation of state power based upon triangular interaction of naval, commercial and colonial activity. He recognised that the sea is a great global highway. One of his key insights was that a state without a land frontier is better placed to pursue sea power.[13] In such ways his ideas remain relevant today despite changes such as decolonisation and the development of international legal regimes at sea. Mahan's writings appear to have been influential in China as it has developed its maritime power.[14]

Corbett, in 1911, published *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and it remains the classic exposition of the subject.[15] Mahan's and Corbett's ideas are more consistent with each other than often

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10 Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, 199-200.
11 Clausewitz, *On War*, 141, 578.
12 Information from the late RADM James Goldrick, RAN.
13 Reeve, 'Mahan, Corbett and Modern Maritime Strategy'.
14 Holmes and Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan.*
15 Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was republished in 1988 in an edition edited by Eric Grove.

thought.[16] Corbett's key insight was that maritime strategy revolves around lines of communication and not, as in land warfare, control of territory.[17] Command of the sea is about control, use and denial of these lines of communication. Such command, often local or temporary, is usually in dispute. The role of the fleet is to support diplomacy, protect commerce, and support land operations, and to act against the enemy's capacity in all these areas. He saw economic warfare as the primary instrument of maritime strategy against continental states.[18] Corbett appreciated the role of the defensive, as well as the offensive, in naval warfare. He perceived how maritime strategy could be a tool of discretionary statecraft, allowing participation in limited conflict or limited participation in unlimited war. The classic form of limited warfare was blockade, something consistent with Australian doctrine.[19] He advocated the British way of war – maritime, limited, joint and in coalition, and believed in peace through deterrence. Corbett's maritime strategy, based on the long sweep of British naval history, is for that reason applicable to greater and lesser powers alike. It is particularly applicable to a maritime power such as Australia. Like Britain, Australia is dependent on seaborne trade, and engaged in alliance and balance of power diplomacy. Its priorities are deterrence of conflict, home defence and the safety of the sea lanes. Its preferred way of war is to fight offshore, in coalition, with joint forces and limited power projection. Despite technical developments, contemporary maritime strategy is still largely built upon classical theory.

Navies have long been well suited to the employment of graduated force. Today it is possible to conceive of a trinity of naval roles: diplomatic, constabulary and military, unified by the use of the sea.[20] Naval diplomacy, through presence, can involve coalition building and coercion.[21] Constabulary roles can include policing of illegal fishing and migration, counter-piracy operations, and dealing with grey zone warfare such as sabotage. Constabulary capability is particularly useful for medium powers with a vested interest in a rules-based order.[22]

At the war-fighting level, with the possible exception of the US Navy, complete command of the sea is no longer feasible. Navies today see sea control as the key, definable as 'the condition that exists when a country has the freedom of action to use an area of sea for its own purposes for a sustained period of time, and, if necessary, deny its use to an adversary'.[23] Sea control can be achieved by decisive battle, blockade of an enemy fleet, or the more defensive approach of a fleet-in-being.[24] Wider sea control might be achieved by a major power and exercised by its allies. Local sea control might be achieved and exercised by a medium power such as Australia.[25] The key application of sea control is the use and denial of sea lines of communication (SLOC). Protection of sea transport is best executed in coalition with allies and partners, as during the two world wars, given the mutual interests and long distances usually involved.

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16 Hattendorf, *Naval History and Maritime Strategy: Collected Essays*, 86-7; McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, 247-55.

17 For a convenient summary of Corbett's ideas see Reeve, 'Sir Julian Corbett (1854-1922): His Place Among Maritime Strategists'.

18 Lambert, A, *The British Way of War. Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, 205.

19 *ADF Maritime Power*, 2025, pp.71, 87.

20 Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy,* Chapter 1.

21 Till*, Seapower. A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 366.

22 Hill, *Medium Power Strategy Revisited*, 5.

23 *ADF Maritime Power*, 2025, p.62.

24 Till, *Seapower. A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, Chapter 7.

25 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Defence Strategy 2024*, 39.

Sea denial, using maritime interdiction operations to prevent an enemy using the sea for his own purposes, might be conducted, for example, in defence of national territory or deployed forces. Sea denial is, like sea control, relative in time and place.[26] History shows that sea denial, when not a function of dominant sea control, will fail, as did Japanese strategy in the southwest Pacific during World War II.[27] Sea control also enables power projection ashore, in the form of joint operations or strike warfare.

A number of Australians have interpreted the canon of strategic thought through a national lens. These include Commodore Alan 'Rocker' Robertson and Rear Admiral James Goldrick, who wrote in the 1990s and early 2000s, from their practitioner's perspectives, *Centre of the Ocean World: Australia and Maritime Strategy* and the first iteration of *Australian Maritime Doctrine* respectively.[28] Commodore Sam Bateman, often in collaboration with Professor Anthony Bergin, advanced Australian maritime strategic thought in a broader regional context.[29] Through this accumulated scholarship, there is a more widespread appreciation of concepts such as sea supremacy, sea control and denial, deterrence and blockade, and of how they can be applied in a coherent maritime strategy.

The benefits of a guiding strategy

Since Federation in 1901, Australia's maritime strategy has been the product of competing demands and tensions. Some of these factors, such as the influence of imperial defence policy or superpower competition, have had grand strategic implications.'[30] There has also been the abiding issue of developing a fit-for-purpose maritime strategy, executed by Australia's maritime forces, in the face of inevitable fiscal and personnel constraints. In the different iterations of Australia's maritime strategy, sometimes the strategy and its underpinning force structure have fallen short due to insufficient resources as well as inappropriate policy.

The acquisition of a fleet unit, centred on the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* (pictured above), by the RAN in 1913 and its service in World War I saw an alignment of strategy and force structure which has not been bettered in the national story. A maritime strategy for an island nation, dependent on maritime trade, was fused with a conception of trans-oceanic warfare which was the brainchild of Sir John Fisher, the professional head of the Royal Navy, assisted by Corbett according to his own ideas.[31] Australia gained the independent navy it sought as part of collective naval defence of the British Empire. Powerful within the region, the force could be deployed in local, regional or distant waters.[32] When tested in conflict, it served as intended, deterring the German East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron from approaching Australian waters in 1914.[33] Its other roles included power projection against German bases in the Pacific, escorting the First AIF troop convoy across the Indian Ocean, and serving

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26 Till, *Seapower. A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 196.

27 Reeve, *Maritime Strategy and Defence of the Archipelagic Inner Arc*.

28 Robertson, *Centre of the Ocean World: Australia and Maritime Strategy*; *Australian Maritime Doctrine. RAN Doctrine 1*, first edition, 2000.

29 See for example Bateman and Bergin, *Sea Change: Advancing Australia's Ocean Interests*.

30 There is a school of thought that only great powers need grand strategy. But it is commonly held that the concept is relevant to any state or nation. Balzacq and Krebs (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, 9-10

31 Lambert, A, *The British Way of War. Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, 197-201, 223.

32 Lambert, N, 'Sir John Fisher, the Fleet Unit Concept, and the Creation of the Royal Australian Navy'.

33 Stevens, '1914-1918: World War I', 33.

as part of the imperial battle force in the North Sea. This was the holistic assertion of blue water maritime strategy by a tailored force. The RAN's wartime role vindicated the 1909 imperial strategy and the fleet unit concept. This strategy-driven approach to capability development was highly effective in terms of both utilisation of resources and successful outcomes.

World War I also demonstrated how, by their nature, maritime campaigns are always potentially global. The RAN had to be able to contribute to this effort, often some distance from Australia, as well as provide for coastal maritime defence. Dr David Stevens wrote of the subsequent interwar period: 'The nation's greatest vulnerability continued to be its seaborne trade and by protecting shipping and supporting imperial forces the RAN was making the most effective contribution to Australian security.'[34]

Australia between the wars lacked a coherent maritime strategy for, and adequate investment in, its national defence. Sheltering beneath the assurances of an overstretched imperial power, its minimal cruiser force was insufficient to protect national territory and trade when war broke out in the Pacific. The failure of the Singapore strategy, in terms of non-arrival of sufficient British naval power, with the loss of Malaya, the fall of Singapore, and Allied defeat in the Java Sea, left Australia exposed to attack. It was saved by distance and Japanese strategic over-extension, as well as the presence of United States (US) forces.[35] Australian governments, since the 1920s, had promoted industrial and technological development to the point where self-reliant mobilisation could occur.[36] A national wartime shipbuilding effort, co-operation with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), and RAN roles in protection of shipping, fleet actions and amphibious warfare within an alliance context all brought force structure and strategy into effective alignment.[37]

During the Cold War, when it acquired carrier aviation, the RAN's primary task was trade protection and anti-submarine warfare in the event of general conflict with the Soviet Union. The Australia, New Zealand and Malaya Agreement, (ANZAM) ANZUS Treaty and the Radford-Collins Agreement involved a focus on Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. This blue water orientation was combined with expeditionary wars in Korea, during the Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation, and in Vietnam. The RAN successfully bridged these missions, aided by a broad and flexible force structure, operating in conjunction with Commonwealth and US allies.[38] Following Vietnam and British withdrawal from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s, Australia moved towards self-reliance within an alliance context. The Defence of Australia (DOA) strategy of the 1980s, emphasising denial in the northern approaches, provided a policy bridging home defence and wider engagement. It allowed for Southeast Asian commitments under the Five Power agreement, naval deployments to the Northwest Indian Ocean following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and participation in the Gulf and Iraq wars. It was however an essentially continental strategy for a maritime nation and therefore reactive, rather

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34 Stevens, 'The Royal Australian Navy and the Strategy for Australia's Defence, 1921-42', 77.

35 Sears, '1929-1939: Depression and Rearmament', 92-4, 97-8; Stevens, 'The Royal Australian Navy and the Strategy for Australia's Defence, 1921-42'.

36 Ross, *Armed and Ready*, xiii-xvi, 432-3. There is evidence that Australian war-making capacity by 1942 encouraged the Imperial Japanese Army to reject the Navy's proposal for invasion of the continent. Ross, *Armed and Ready*, 408-18.

37 Goldrick, '1939-1941: The War Against Germany and Italy' and '1941-1945: The War Against Japan'.

38 Cooper, '1945-1954: The Korean War Era', 162-4, 178-9; Grey, 'The Royal Australian Navy in the Era of Forward Defence, 1955-75'.

than proactive, in wider context. The surface navy was tied to land-based air cover after the loss of its carriers. Power projection into the Pacific and defence of seaborne trade were problematic.[39] The DOA strategy had its internal logic, but rested on an overstretched force structure and was a mismatch with the maritime environment.

After winning the Cold War, the US and its allies enjoyed general control of the sea and freedom to project power ashore, adopting a global expeditionary strategy. Australian forces participated in the Gulf sanctions blockade against Iraq, the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, peacekeeping operations inter alia in East Timor and the South Pacific, and counter-piracy and counter-terrorism activities in the Western Indian Ocean, as well as maritime constabulary operations closer to home.[40] The RAN's force structure was adequate, given its alliances, in these essentially permissive strategic environments. The last decade has however seen the acceleration of great power competition, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, with the growth of force structures designed for conventional maritime warfare. The need for Australia to participate in maritime coalitions and to protect sea lines of communication (SLOC) has coincided with the block obsolescence of its limited surface and submarine forces. Plans for replacement and expansion have been adopted in the context of a national defence strategy emphasising local and regional concerns.[41]

Australia has best aligned maritime strategy and force structure when combining considered planning, adequate investment, and full engagement with its maritime environment. It came closest to disaster, after neglecting all three, in 1942 – the only moment in national history, and since European settlement, when Australia and its allies lost control of the sea in the northern approaches to the continent. Favourable strategic outcomes have often depended on the flexibility of naval capabilities, the commitment and calibre of naval people, the leveraging of technology, and the role of allies. Alliances have, in turn, been sustained by a residual naval-maritime strategic culture and appreciation of a global maritime strategic framework.[42]

Understanding capabilities and limitations

A maritime strategy must be informed by the limits of policy and force structure. Such limits are of various kinds: geo-strategic, diplomatic, international legal, domestic political, human, economic, technological, but above all fiscal and material. The level of resources which a government can devote to maritime forces will ultimately determine a maritime nation's strategic shape and weight. A medium maritime power must build and maintain its forces within such constraints. While it may seek both quality and quantity, this is unwise. Its priorities, imposed by the discipline of strategic thought, choice, and risk management, are versatility and adequacy. It should not design its forces narrowly for one conflict scenario.[43] Allies are indispensable in easing the tension for a medium power between resources and possible strategic aspirations. The price of alliances may be paid in

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39 Jones, P.D., '1972-1983: Towards Self Reliance' and '1983-1991: A Period of Change and Uncertainty', 212-14, 240-2; Woodman, 'Defending the Moat: Maritime Strategy and Self-Reliance'.

40 Goldrick, 'Maritime Sanctions Enforcement Against Iraq, 1990-2003'; Spurling, '1991-2001: The Era of Defence Reform', 290-3.

41 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Defence Strategy 2024*, 25.

42 Reeve, 'Naval Politicians or Gentlemanly Technocrats?', 10-12.

43 Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, 207-8.

various currencies: strategic position, basing, communications, intelligence facilities, raw materials and supply, human resources, and diplomatic support, as well as in military commitments.[44]

A medium power such as Australia is well placed to capitalise on such offerings while maximising self-reliance and levering geographical advantage and technology. Given the nature of its seaborne trade, with long oceanic passages, Australia's maritime strategy has inevitably involved allies, and typically the pre-eminent maritime power of the age, be it Britain or the US. Australia's forces have had to be able to 'plug into' that great power's strategy, to be interoperable with its navy, and to contribute to underwriting the global maritime system. This was true in 1913 and it arguably remains true over a century later, despite the vicissitudes of great power policies and geopolitical change.

[44] Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers,* 198-9, 209, 219.

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About the Author

Dr John Reeve is an Honorary Senior Lecturer and former Osborne Fellow in Naval History at the University of NSW (Canberra). He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and specialises in diplomatic, naval and strategic history and contemporary maritime strategic affairs, has published thirty-nine refereed journal articles, book chapters, and working papers, and has authored or co-edited five books.

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