

Safeguarding the Indo-Pacific Region: Insights from Australia on Maritime Security

Event Report

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Contextual Background

In an era marked by rapid geopolitical transformation and unprecedented technological advances, maritime security in the Indo-Pacific has become a critical imperative for both national and regional stability. On April 8, 2025, the Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP) in collaboration with Murdoch University's Indo-Pacific Research Centre organized a talk with Dr. Thomas S. Wilkins on the topic *Safeguarding the Indo-Pacific Region: Insights from Australia, India, and Japan on Human/Maritime Security*. Dr. Wilkins is a Distinguished Research Fellow (non-resident) at The Japan Forum for International Relations and an Associate Professor in International Security at the University of Sydney, specializing in Asia-Pacific security affairs.

This report summarizes Dr. Wilkins' talk, which presented a comprehensive analysis of Australia's strategic maritime environment. Its focus is on Australia's evolving role, its complex threats, and the coordinated policy responses underway to secure its vast maritime domain.

With its extensive coastlines, one of the world's largest exclusive economic zones (EEZ), and a deep reliance on international sea lines of communication,

Australia confronts unique challenges and opportunities as global power dynamics shift and hybrid tactics become increasingly prevalent. Australia is frequently categorized as a "middle power," as embedded in its 2024 National Defense Strategy; it simultaneously benefits from – and is constrained by – this role.

With the world's sixth-largest land mass, abundant natural resources, an advanced economy (GDP of approximately USD 1.7 trillion), and annual defense spending of USD 37 billion, Australia ranks among the lower "Top 20" of the world's most powerful nations. However, with only about 26 million inhabitants concentrated near its 60,000 km-long coastline and controlling one of the world's largest exclusive economic zones (approximately 8.5 million sq. km), Australia's security is inextricably linked to its reliance on maritime trade.

Key Takeaway 1: Geopolitical Dynamics and National Security Imperatives

Recent changes on the global stage have created a growing sense of uncertainty. One of the biggest shifts has been Donald Trump's return to the White House, which has disrupted traditional economic and security ties. The U.S. now seems to be competing strategically (even with its allies),

pushing countries like Australia, Japan, and India to rethink their relationships and look for new ways to cooperate.

Often seen as a middle power, Australia faces a unique challenge in managing a huge maritime area while maintaining a strong national defense. While it may not be directly threatened by distant conflicts in places like the South or East China Seas, its close alignment with the U.S. and other partners means it could easily be drawn into regional tensions. A clear example of this risk came earlier this year when Chinese navy ships held unannounced live-fire drills in the Tasman Sea. This caused safety warnings for nearby air traffic and sparked a political reaction in Canberra. It also raised tough questions about Australia's ability to monitor its own waters, especially given that the Chinese task force had nearly circled the entire continent without being properly tracked.

This incident highlighted two serious concerns. First, it showed that China's navy has the capability and the intent to operate near Australia. Second, it revealed a worrying gap in Australia's maritime awareness and response apparatus. As such, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is essential for monitoring activity in Australia's vast waters. Recent incidents have exposed gaps in detection and response, highlighting the urgent need for improved surveillance, coordination, and technological investment.

China's incursions in the South China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait impact Australia's interest in preserving regional stability, and given Trump's challenges to the rule-based order, it is essential to complement Australia's long-term

project of boosting its surface fleet and flotilla of deployable SSNs with short-term projects focused on multi-domain defence cooperation to provide safety nets in case of U.S. negligence in defense. Simultaneously, consortia like GCAP and AUKUS need to be enhanced. The solution is to create self-reliance within alliances while boosting national capabilities and readiness to insure against any future lack of U.S. defense commitment in the region..

One key element of Australia's defense strategy is its focus on the "Indo-Pacific Arc", a wide stretch of ocean that runs from the Northeast Indian Ocean through Southeast Asia to the Pacific. This area is Australia's front line of defense and includes the sea routes and northern approaches vital to its security and economic lifeblood. By focusing more attention and resources on this region, Australia aims to protect its interests while also supporting the broader goal of keeping the Indo-Pacific free, open, and based on shared rules. Strategic plans like Plan Mercator and Plan Pelorus are central to this effort. They delineate how Australia plans to maintain a strong naval presence, build more capable forces, and stay ready for both current and future challenges. These are important steps toward ensuring that Australia can respond quickly and effectively in a region that is becoming more complex daily.

During the discussion, Prof. Wilkins analyzed Australia's perspective on the Taiwan issue: despite its criticality for regional stability, the contingency issue is not highly developed in Australia, though mentioned as a concern in the national defense and maritime security strategy and in the Australia-Japan Strategic Partnership.

But there are no publicly available details on what Australia is going to do in case of a Strait Crisis. In terms of response strategy, former PM Morrison spoke openly about the relevance of AUKUS to such a contingency. .

Key Takeaway 2: Modernization and Expansion of Naval Capabilities

Australia is undergoing comprehensive modernization and expansion of its naval forces, addressing both surface and subsurface domains to meet the emerging maritime challenges. This dual modernization is driven by the urgent need to counter increasingly sophisticated adversaries and ensure that the nation's naval assets are versatile enough to handle high-intensity conflicts as well as routine security operations in the area.

On the surface, significant investments are being made in procuring and upgrading key assets. Australia is set to acquire 6 Hunter-class Frigates, 11 new general-purpose Frigates (such as Japan's Mogami-class), six new Large Optionally Crewed Surface Vessels, the upgrading of Hobart-Class Destroyers, and the provision of 25 smaller vessels for the Australian Border Force, specifically for enhancing border security. These acquisitions will be complemented by implementing advanced missile systems, Tomahawk and Naval Strike missiles, and the Standard Missile-6 long-range air defense missile to ensure that legacy and new naval assets are well-equipped to operate in today's geostrategic context.

In the subsurface domain, the focus is on procuring nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS trilateral partnership, alongside investments in

emerging technologies such as crewed undersea vehicles and automated underwater systems. These projects are designed to transform Australia's naval defense posture. Although some initiatives, like those linked to AUKUS cooperation, may not fully materialize until the 2040s, they represent a long-term commitment to maintaining a secure and capable maritime force.

Key Takeaway 3: Addressing Emerging Non-Traditional Threats

In addition to the conventional military challenges, Australia faces a range of non-traditional security threats that reflect the changing dynamics of globalization, often referred to as the "blue acceleration." In today's increasingly crowded maritime environment, the risks include aspects such as gray zone operations, which encompass unsafe and provocative tactics that fall short of full-scale warfare. These operations have been observed as unsafe intercepts by hostile forces, particularly in strategic areas like the South China Sea, Yellow Sea, and Sea of Japan.

One of the most vulnerable assets is undersea infrastructure and more specifically the extensive network of communication cables that support 90-99 percent of global data transmission. Recent reports highlighting advances in controversial capabilities to disrupt these cables have prompted calls for enhanced resilience measures. Strategic recommendations include developing redundancy in cable networks and investing in robust repair capabilities to safeguard these essential lifelines.

While contraband, irregular migration, and environmental challenges

such as damage to the Great Barrier Reef remain concerns, they are largely managed by the Maritime Border Command and related agencies. However, the broad spectrum of non-traditional threats necessitates a multifactorial approach to security that combines technological innovation, robust infrastructure protection, and proactive policy measures to maintain the integrity of Australia's maritime domain.

A key point that emerged during the discussion as a solution to address both traditional and non-traditional security threats is the possibility for Australia to invest in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and capacity building for mutual stability between Australia and its South and Indo-Pacific neighbors. Such initiatives could benefit from a clearer plan, perhaps through a new White Paper on Foreign Policy to cover security issues from the perspective of foreign policy, to efficiently allocate the funds to allies and overcome budget constraints. In particular, ODA could also be beneficial to address other non-traditional threats, such as piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, and environmental threats to support Australia in effectively policing its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and uphold its sovereign rights under the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP). This would have effect in combatting Chinese efforts to gain economic and political inroads into Australia's regional sphere of influence.

Key Takeaway 4: Strengthening Strategic and Regional Partnerships

In today's volatile security landscape, no nation can effectively confront the multifaceted challenges of maritime security in isolation. Australia's strategic

outlook increasingly relies on deepening and diversifying regional partnerships to ensure a collective response to emerging threats. Historical reliance on the U.S. as the primary security guarantor is now supplemented by enhanced ties with middle powers and regional allies.

Australia is committed to helping its neighbors, especially Pacific Island Countries, to strengthen their maritime security. Initiatives like the 'Pacific Step-Up Policy' support these nations in protecting their waters and sea routes. This also helps improve overall security across the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, Australia is reinvigorating multilateral dialogues and relations with strategic partners such as Japan and India. Nowadays, in fact, there is a strong push to rebuild these channels to support coordinated operations and share intelligence and technological advancements. Moreover, Australia is leveraging participation in international forums, such as the NATO-IP4 (NATO plus Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand), to broaden its strategic network.

The collective focus is on building a resilient regional security posture. This involves modernizing military capabilities, enhancing surveillance and response systems, and supporting broader initiatives integrating diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian measures. This holistic approach aims to create a robust and enduring security framework capable of confronting both conventional and non-traditional threats.

During the discussion, AUKUS was identified as a pivotal forum to ensure both regional stability and U.S. commitment

due to the high degree of correspondence that this forum has with members' defense strategies, projects, and wide range of alliances. Furthermore, the discussion led to considering Japan's advancements in cyber, AI, electromagnetic warfare and intelligence capabilities as assets for becoming a valuable partner to advance the second pillar of the AUKUS. Its advancements in railgun technology also make it a possible target for EU interests, and the AUKUS could come into possible defense agreements as a broker. Indeed, AUKUS provides multiple alliance entry points for Japan's defense, but there are other fora, like NATO-IP4 and the Global Combat Aircraft Programme (GCAP), where Japan could make valuable contributions.

Regarding the reinforcement of the Indo-Pacific alliances and the possibility of a trilateral alignment between India, Japan, and Australia, the different political dispositions of the Indo-Pacific countries – with particular regard to New Delhi – potentially limits trilateral possibilities if compared with bilateral relations between Australia and Japan. India will be a useful ally, but any kind of alliance with New Delhi will not be the pillar of Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Disclaimer: This report is solely based on the discussion and does not represent the views of either IPRC or ISDP.



Institute for Security and Development Policy
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Nacka, Sweden
www.isdp.eu | info@isdp.eu