

## Australia's proposed 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy: A case of biting off more than it can chew?

By Dr. John Bruni

Over the past 10 years, Australian foreign policy has waxed and waned between a desire to maintain its traditional security ties to the United States, assist US interests in maintaining its security presence in the Western Pacific by formalising defence links to Japan, and balancing Australian traditional security ties to the US with Australia's increasingly important commercial ties to China. All of these steps in and of themselves are eminently rational. Australia is after all a small country relative to the much larger powers to its north. However, the reality of Australian foreign policy is that there are clear limitations to what a country the size of Australia can achieve without overstretching. By trying to appease too many different national audiences, the risk is that Canberra's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) can easily lose focus. Though a large department, employing over 2,000 people, its approaches to specific regional complexities are dictated by political expediency. At a time when tertiary institutions are cutting back their support for Asian language and culture programs, is it prudent to begin looking further West across the Indian Ocean to engage in the dangers and complexities of the subcontinent and beyond?

Arguably a foreign ministry's responsibility is to have as broad a brief as possible on the world around it. The problem for Australia it seems, is that while it certainly is ambitious, DFAT might have reached the natural limits of expansion. If we look at the Indian



subcontinent, it is an inordinately complex region with great linguistic, sectarian and cultural diversity. Australia on the other hand has only the apparent advantage of sharing with India membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations, where it is universally considered 'a given' that such shared colonial legacy is enough to find areas of common ground between interested parties. Yet it is not that simple. Contrary to the commonly held belief that migration builds bridges between countries, Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and Pakistani migrants to Australia have in no noticeable way brought Australia 'closer' to the subcontinent. That Australians, in many cases unknowingly, buy computers with Bangalore-made chips, proves nothing. A simple commercial exchange does not bring

about a cultural awakening or understanding. The fact that many Australian financial services have outsourced their call-centres to India, is certainly no cause for celebration if Australian public sentiment on talkback radio is any guide. It is merely the exchange of goods and services for cash. The fact that India, the world's largest democracy, remains faced off against Pakistan (a fragile political entity) in a near constant state of military provocation/counter-provocation, and confrontation since the two countries broke from British rule in 1947, certainly complicates the equation. A warming in relations with one, will almost certainly mean the freezing of relations with the other while India and Pakistan are locked in a zero-sum game – a dangerous game to play for two nuclear armed rivals, and an unappealing prospect for any extra-regional state to get involved in.

To be sure, American interest in India as a strategic counter-balance to China and as an implied warning to Pakistan to modify its behaviour in America's War on Terror, has spurred Australian foreign policy pundits to cast their eyes West. But this policy shift seems to signal much, much more than a warming of ties to India. It potentially means a redistribution of DFAT capabilities to the entire Indian Ocean littoral, that is, all countries that share an Indian Ocean coastline, and that includes the Arabian Gulf states, continental East Africa and Madagascar. Therefore, what is being calculated is that with Australia having a two-ocean naval fleet, the country can

assume responsibility to promote international stability and freedom of commerce throughout not just the northern Pacific (linking the US to the economic powerhouses East Asia), but the Indian Ocean as well.

However, as grand an objective as this is, one has to recognise that Australia's naval contingent based in Western Australia is small and its reach circumscribed to the number of operational platforms it has at its disposal.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, trade with China, South Korea and Japan currently dwarfs all trade Australia has with India, let alone the remainder of the Indian Ocean littoral states, some of which have no significant trade ties to Australia at all.<sup>2</sup> Then, there are the very

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of Perth being the home base for 5 out of the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN's) fleet of 8 Anzac class light frigates, only 2-3 ships would be operational at any one time. Similarly, Perth is the home base for Australia's entire submarine fleet of 6 boats, but only 2 would be normally operational. This means that the RAN would only ever have between 4-5 'capital vessels' operating from its primary Indian Ocean base (HMAS Stirling) at any one time. Considering that Western Australia has Australia's longest coastline of 10,194 kilometres, and that the state of Western Australia accounts for over half of the current national mining boom, this is a surprisingly low number of naval assets to patrol and protect this critical area.

<sup>2</sup> According to DFAT figures for 2010-11, the combined total of Australia two-way trade with China, South Korea and Japan accounted to some \$200 billion whereas combined two-way trade with the Indian sub continental states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh & Sri Lanka amounted to some \$20 billion. Two-way trade with the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) States of the Arabian peninsular equals another \$10 billion. The Gillard and any future Australian government will skew DFAT resources to where the trade is greatest. Therefore, until Australian trade with the Indian Ocean littoral

real limits of Australia's ability to scale up DFAT to be 'all things to all people'. For instance, Australia has not had a great deal of success in leading the microstates of the South Pacific – a geographic area considered Australia's backyard:

- a. There are few major South Pacific language and culture programs on offer at Australian universities.
- b. DFAT postings to South Pacific countries are by and large considered 'hardship posts'.

As a consequence there are few DFAT personnel who would volunteer to expend much time and effort in learning South Pacific languages and/or study their cultures. We need to ask ourselves what makes the South Pacific so daunting an area? The answer is simple – tribalism. On Australia's oceanic eastern front, the South Pacific, an area that the new Australian Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, has recently acknowledged as an area of particular concern, tribalism is what prevents Australian policy makers from making headway in the South Pacific. Australia's inability to connect, sees the country see-saw between so-called 'bully tactics', where aid and trade is tied to what Australia considers 'good political behaviour' on the one hand, to an unnatural fawning over the apparent exotic political and cultural diversity that exists among the South Pacific

island-states. Either way, the Australian political elite does not consider Australia to be 'first among equals' in the South Pacific region. They consider Australia to be a Western outlier, a country that through its own 'manifest destiny' was colonised by the British, and saw its diverse indigenous populations reduced due to a combination of deliberate racial policies, the introduction of Western diseases, and callous disregard – which now has been recalibrated to blundering political micro-management.<sup>3</sup>

Essentially, this leaves neighbour New Zealand in a much better position to lead the South Pacific. The country's population is almost 15 per cent Polynesian and has a degree of traditional Maori tribalism embedded within the New Zealand political fabric. The Anglo elite of New Zealand have come to accept that their continuing peaceful co-existence among their Polynesian 'hosts' is based on accepting and respecting traditional Maori life, and respecting locally based laws that have little to do with the British colonial legacy of Westminster parliamentarianism.

The fact that Australia's political elite considers itself removed from the need to adapt and accept local Aboriginal tribalism in a similar way to the New Zealand example, means that it is singularly unable to understand and/or manage tribal societies that dominate the entire Indian Ocean littoral. In a sense this likens Australia much

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markedly increases, this situation is unlikely to change Australia's order of priorities.

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<sup>3</sup> The indigenous population of Australia accounts for 2.4 percent of its total of 22 million.

more to the American ‘norm’ than most would credit. Like Australia, the patterns of White settlement in the United States saw the wholesale destruction of indigenous culture and the political marginalisation of surviving pockets.<sup>4</sup> Like Australia, the United States did not need to deal with indigenous tribes that would have seen them integrated in any meaningful way within mainstream political life. And, it should therefore come as no surprise that both the United States and Australia find dealing with tribal societies at a government-to-government level an exercise in frustration. DFAT in Australia, and the State Department in the US, generally identify their respective countries as not only post-colonial, but also post-tribal. Both Australia and America consider their political constructs to be far beyond more ‘rudimentary’ forms of governance, which accounts for their ‘natural affinity’ to other countries that share a similar view – China, South Korea, Japan, and most of the countries of Europe.

Turning West and undertaking a new diplomatic outreach programme to the Indian Ocean littoral is an idea that has yet to measure up to actual Australian national maturity. Australia is too small in size, mind and political culture to take on such a task, except in an ad hoc manner. The only way this approach would be of benefit to Canberra is if it were deliberately tied to US

global strategic manoeuvres. Indeed, in a recent report on Australia acting as a ‘strategic pivot’ for US forces in America’s undeclared confrontation with China, Australia’s Indian Ocean territory, the Cocos Islands, is now seen as a natural replacement for the American presence on the British territory of Diego Garcia. Australian reporters and defence policy commentators have suggested that were the US presence in Diego Garcia moved to the Cocos Islands, this new base of US operations might see American drone maritime surveillance and strike missions conducted off this isolated Australian territory. The ability of US nuclear powered submarines to transit through the Royal Australian Navy’s base, HMAS Stirling, in Western Australia, might also bolster DFAT’s claims that the Indian Ocean is indeed becoming a more important area to Australian national interests, requiring more of an effort at engagement. But unless DFAT can quantitatively and qualitatively improve its ability to engage the multiplicity of largely tribal societies around the Indian Ocean littoral in a more determined and coherent fashion than has been the case with Australia’s experience in the South Pacific, an ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy for Australia is likely to make for a round of interesting headlines and media commentary, but find little in the way of substance.

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<sup>4</sup> The indigenous population of the United States today comprises approximately 0.9 percent of its total of 313 million.

**Following Images Accessed 31/03/2012**

Indian Ocean littoral map:

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c5/Indianocean.PNG/300px-Indianocean.PNG>