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Australia's Maritime Intentions: To Expand or Not to Expand?

By Geoff Till

Synopsis

The October 2013 Australian fleet review illustrates naval trends in the Indo-Pacific and shows that Australia is currently set on a strategic policy of maritime expansion and forward engagement. There are, however, doubts about Canberra's future defence spending under an Abbott government.

Commentary

EARLY LAST month, Australia's Fleet Review in Sydney saw the participation of 18 international warships, including the RSS *Endeavour*, Singapore's 6,500 tonne Landing Platform Dock (LPD). The Singapore warship with a crew of 65, a battery of missiles as well as 12 vehicles and bulk cargo, is normally involved in multinational naval peace support, disaster relief and other humanitarian operations.

The RSS Endeavour's presence, at the invitation of Canberra, added to the diversity of participation in the Fleet Review, held to commemorate the arrival on 5 October, exactly 100 years earlier, of the so-called British-built (but in large measure Australian paid-for) 'Fleet unit' which more or less started the Royal Australian Navy. It was a spectacular display of Australia's naval ambitions, marked by, among other things, a grand march-past of the participating naval contingents, a big naval arms fair and several related international conferences.

Long history of fleet review

There was, however, some opposition. On 7 October, The Sydney Morning Herald ran its letter page under the heading '*Navy spectacle glorifies war and wastes our money*' although most of its letters did not support that view.

Fleet reviews have a long history. Once, these were occasional, formal occasions in which the Sovereign inspected his fleet to assess its current capability for future operations. As ways of confirming fleet readiness, they were a form of quality control. The last time there was such a purely functional review was in May 1944 - a secret one - held just before the Allies invaded Normandy.

But fleet reviews soon took on other characteristics and justifications. They became a means of showing the public what the Government was spending its taxes on, and of eliciting their support for further such efforts. As one commentator described, the Sydney event was a means of binding the navy and the community together. It was also designed to convey strategic messages to the outside world, most often as a display of military might -

and technological prowess - intended to impress and to encourage respect from other powers.

Starting perhaps in the Indo-Pacific with the Indian Navy's 'Bridges of Friendship' fleet review off Mumbai in 2001, such naval gatherings also sought to illustrate the benign aspects of naval power by providing a practical display of *international* togetherness. 'Look,' they seem to say, 'at how cooperative we are, and how much we contribute together to humanitarian operations, to keeping shipping safe and to preserving your peace and prosperity.'

Whatever their motivation and impact, Fleet Reviews as very public and discrete events are important and attract a lot of interest both for what they tell us about the international environment and about the country that hosts and organises them. *Aficionados* of such issues can spot who's in and who's out, can compare technologies and capabilities between the participating navies, can speculate about the priorities of the organiser and deduce the domestic and international reaction.

What the review tells us

So what did it tell us about the international context? Some clues emerged from who were there and who were not. The Russian contingent pulled out at the last minute, perhaps because of their current focus on Syria-related deployments; the Chinese ship's company was not allowed ashore; the Canadians saw their two ships colliding with each other on the way and had to withdraw. There was significant presence of the Spanish navy's replenishment oiler *Cantabria* which is currently part of the *Australian* fleet (Spain has a central role in Australia's fleet construction programme). Then, surprisingly, there was the presence of the Nigerian frigate NNS *Thunder* - an indication of a navy on an upward trajectory in response to a deteriorating security situation in the Gulf of Guinea.

Naval technologists and capability 'spotters' compared platforms and systems in the assembled fleet and reviewed the stands in the huge naval arms fair. They were especially interested in HMS *Daring*, a modern cruiser masquerading as a destroyer, (now in Singapore) clearly a different generation to everything else in the review, and according to Britain's current First Sea Lord, symbolising a 'naval renaissance.'

Shedding light on Australian intentions

But what does this all tell us about Australia? No-one could have missed the pride of the Australian navy in its past and its determination and confidence in its future. It has a very ambitious building programme that includes two large amphibious assault ships, 'the most capable ships ever operated by the navy,' advanced air warfare destroyers, a frigate and patrol boat replacement programme and the much-discussed 12-strong submarine project.

Significantly, at one of the connected conferences, LieutGeneral David Morrison, Chief of Army - a position not normally associated with 'dark blue' thinking -- went out of his way to endorse Australia's adoption of a thoroughly 'maritime' strategy in the wake of its Iraq and Afghanistan experience.

He spoke of the Army's determination to work closely with the Navy's current and projected power projection fleet to build up a substantial amphibious element. This signalled a shift away from the Army's traditional 'continental' and counter-insurgency mode of thinking. If all this comes to fruition, it would contribute significantly to an Australian strategic policy of forward engagement in Southeast Asia, the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

But it is a big 'if.' Some wonder whether the money needed to support such aspirations will actually be forthcoming. While the new Abbott government has promised an uplift in Australian defence spending it has remained vague about by how much and when. Others wonder at the capacity of the country's defence industrial base to deliver the capabilities needed, or of its military system to grow the necessary skill sets - despite all the external help the country is getting.

Still others wonder about the impact of future governmental changes, shifts in key personnel and, most obviously of unpredictable international events. Only time will tell, but for now, to judge by this review at least, Australian intentions are clear: Canberra wants to sustain its policy of a forward engagement with the wider Indo-Pacific region through a naval presence.

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