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The Growing Strategic Significance of Islands

By Geoffrey Till

SYNOPSIS

The Asia-Pacific is a maritime region comprising many islands and archipelagoes. Recent military developments are making these more strategically significant. This brings in new levels of risk that could destabilise the region and so needs to be handled sensitively.

COMMENTARY

QUITE APART from the continuing jurisdictional dispute over the South China Sea, recent developments in the Asia-Pacific – or what some now call the Indo-Pacific region – underline the fact that islands are growing in strategic significance. Islands can be bases for offensive or defensive operations and like Diego Garcia can also offer valuable logistic support for naval and air forces operating throughout the region.

The growing range and precision of land and sea-based missile systems is reducing the strategic effect of the 'tyranny of distance' and contributing to a major rethink about strategic priorities, and the place of islands within them.

Australian Perspectives

In Australia for example, the growth in China's commercial and naval presence, particularly in the islands of the South Pacific, has caused strategists to argue that the Australian mainland is no longer strategically remote from the tensions of the region, if it ever was. Now the country should concentrate its resources on forward-operating military forces that make the most of the archipelago of islands that once were considered part of an 'air-sea gap' between Australia and regional developments that might threaten it.

Hence the very noticeable emphasis on the Navy's developing high quality war-fighting capabilities that will enable it to operate more effectively in a very possibly 'non-permissive' archipelagic environment, at some distance from home.

These capabilities include, most obviously, the Navy's Canberra class amphibious warfare vessels which can land up to 900 troops and operate a variety of rotary and fixed wing aircraft, including the F35b Lightning strike aircraft.

These most likely will operate as part of joint Task Forces that include the new Hobart class air warfare destroyers and in due course Hunter class anti-submarine frigates. Rejuvenated Collins class submarines will provide an extra ring of protection for such task forces, being supplemented in the long term by the future 12-strong Attack class submarines.

New Priority for Forward Defence

The whole force will be sustained by new generation supply vessels. Recently the Royal Australian Navy has put a great deal of emphasis on developing Task Force capabilities that make the best use of all three service domains – land, sea and air.

Illustrating this the Navy recently conducted Exercise 'Talisman Sabre' the largest amphibious assault conducted by Australian joint forces since 1945. This also involved forces from the Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom.

In lower key, the same strategic interest is being shown in the islands of the South Pacific with the re-opening of the old base at Manus in Papua New Guinea and the procurement of the *Arafura* class Ocean Patrol Vessels which are no less than five times larger and potentially more capable than the *Armidale* class patrol boats they are replacing. All this costs money and effort, of course.

Australian defence spending has now increased to very nearly two per cent of GDP and is expected to rise still further. The government has also heavily invested in the idea of developing sovereign defence industry, mainly through a 'continuous build programme'. All this exemplifies the high strategic priority that Canberra now attaches to forward defence amongst the islands to Australia's north.

American Perspectives on Island Chains

Much the same can be seen in the Northeast Pacific where US strategic analysts and force commanders seem likewise intent on re-building their capacity for what is sometimes called 'archipelagic defence'. This is a concept of operations in which all four services, army, navy, marines and air, come together to exploit the strategic opportunities for maritime pressure provided, particularly, by the first and second island chains.

This kind of thinking is not new for the Navy or Air Force but does represent a substantial shift for Army and Marine Forces until recently largely preoccupied by the demands of very different operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here the idea, again, is

to deter sudden attacks and prevent an adversary from trying to pull off a *fait accompli* against an unduly passive opponent.

Such a strategy calls for a mix of mobile and dispersed ground forces deployed in the area of concern, supplemented if and when necessary by agile naval, air and amphibious forces coming in rapidly from outside to contest any such initial assault and provide defence-in-depth of strategic interests further back.

Especially now that the US has withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty missiles and air-defence systems are likely to have a central role to play in any such campaign and have already become the subject of angry rhetorical exchanges between Beijing and Washington.

The relatively new High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) now being extensively deployed by the US Army and Marine Corps will also play an important role in this, as was exemplified by their inclusion in the recent Exercise Talisman Sabre.

Sword that Cuts Both Ways

To this is added the militarisation of the features of the South China Sea by China. With several other claimants and the growing interest in the defence of the Ryuku islands shown in recent years by Japan, the increased strategic salience of islands in the Asia-Pacific region becomes obvious.

But this is a sword that cuts both ways. As the wartime experience of Singapore shows, islands seen as having strategic potential but which are inadequately defended may become vulnerable and tempting targets for those that would feel threatened by their full development, thereby precipitating the very conflict they are intended to prevent.

Experience, moreover, also shows that islands can easily become governmental performance indicators certainly amongst the nationalistic, possibly making them more important than they should be. Equally, those that own such islands, or even live on them, may well resent their hapless involvement in the strategic calculations of other powers.

For all such reasons the growth in the strategic importance of islands is fraught with political and military risk in such a maritime area as the Asia-Pacific and needs to be handled with special care by all the countries involved.

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