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Reflections on the Water's Rim:
A Third Generation Amphibious Culture?

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Australia's Defence Force is embarking on something of a 'third generation' of amphibious culture in military strategic thought. It embraces both its amphibious force capabilities and the future security environment in which they will operate.

AUSTRALIA has an undoubted maritime legacy, both civil and military. Indeed, Australia's first lead military action was an amphibious operation. It was the *Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force* that cleared Germany's Pacific possessions at the outset of the Great War.

Later, Australia's involvement in the WWII Pacific Campaign demanded a huge growth in amphibious capability, as the Allies slowly wrested the initiative. By 1945 Australia was capable of contributing strongly to US operations, as well as independently conducting landings like those at Labuan and Balikpapan in what are now East Malaysia and Indonesia respectively.

Since then, Australia's strategic focus has somewhat fallen short of the axiomatic requirement for an island nation to be able to project its influence into the surrounding seas, in support of its national interests. However, there has been a recent resurgent attention on what might be described as a 'third generation' of amphibious culture. The difference is that *this* generation is not simply military-defensive, but aims to encompass the full extent of 'ways and means' of Australia's foreign policy. It is timely, then, to consider some pertinent lasting principles of maritime strategy, and the new, non-traditional security challenges that will determine how Australia employs its new capability.

A maritime strategy

Sea power is as much about projection of power and influence *at* sea as *from* the sea, and specifically within the littoral environment. In strategic terms, the *littoral* is where the land and sea environments meet – extending either side into each environment as far as force and influence can be projected from the other. Importantly, the littoral exists in the presence of – and influenced by – other domains: not

just air, but increasingly, space and cyberspace. Success in the littoral therefore demands competitive capabilities in each of these environments working in a symbiotic relationship.

The maritime strategy as advanced in Australia's 2009 *Defence White Paper* acknowledges the amphibious nature of the diverse security missions likely to occur in the littoral – along Australia's own coastlines as well as beyond. Five of its nearest neighbours (Indonesia, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji) together comprise over 25,000 islands; furthermore, Southeast Asia alone has over 85,000 km of navigable waterways that also must be considered alongside the marine littoral space.

As globalisation and spiralling world population drive humankind to occupy, urbanise and exploit the littoral, this environment – important throughout human history – will become evermore central to the interests of nations and the global community alike. Future productivity collapses or ecological catastrophes in the littoral could devastate state economies and ways of life, whereas the power and influence of 'grey area' enterprise, political and criminal organisations are proliferating in those same areas too. Blends of both criminal acts and sovereignty threats in the littoral will increasingly test the resolve of Australia and its neighbours, and their national security and law enforcement abilities.

Australia's amphibious capability

The scale of increase in Australia's amphibious capability upon maturation of its Joint Project 2048 – *Amphibious Deployment and Sustainment* – is considerable: simply as a raw tonnage comparison, Australia's present amphibious flotilla totals just over 27,000 tonnes – dwarfed by the future capability's nearly 80,000 tonne aggregate by around 2020. The twin keystones – the new amphibious helicopter assault ships (or LHDs) – will far outstrip the current two *Manoora* class amphibious landing platform ships.

However, Australia's future amphibious capability will rely on air power. Extant Australian capability plans foresee future air-to-air-refuelled conventional take-off-&-landing combat, maritime patrol and airborne early warning aircraft contributing alongside embarked rotary-wing and shipboard air defence assets of the amphibious lift group and escorts. There remains, however, scope to consider the merits of a ship-based unmanned aerial system – combat and/or surveillance – to augment those. Additionally, having the LHDs capable to at least 'lily-pad' coalition Short Take-off Vertical-Landing (STOVL) aircraft during combined operations could prove an attractive extension to their employability.

The future littoral environment

The future littoral environment might harbour not only conventional military, but also irregular adversaries – both state and non-state. Overlaps in the criminal and political domains already has many present-day precedents – such as the violence in southern Thailand, the Abu Sayyaf Group's actions in the Philippines, piracy around the Horn of Africa, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Police and other law enforcement agencies must therefore be equally capable in discharging their roles within the littoral – both autonomously and in concert with military and other government actions.

Adversaries are likely to employ asymmetric tactics to avoid strengths and exploit real and apparent vulnerabilities, and doubtless employ improvised explosive device (IED) technologies and tactics in the sea and air. IEDs are often intuitively – but erroneously – associated with the land environment alone; but in the littoral, maritime and airborne manoeuvre predominate – or are at least co-equal with terrestrial movement. The balance of reliance (and therefore vulnerability) therefore alters towards sea and air.

Australia's future involvement in the littorals of its own territory and elsewhere will not be limited to inserting combat forces in conflict settings: indeed, combinations of military support and sea-lift

actions are not only feasible, but more likely. Rapid response to humanitarian events and disasters – aid, evacuation, reconstruction and sustainment – are likely enough; but equally, demonstrating Australia's foreign policy intent may occur through providing a reassuring or overt security presence.

Other, less reactive scenarios might involve the amphibious delivery of development assistance and cooperation, as well as trainers, builders and advisers across and beyond government – including community and private sectors. But an amphibious vessel is no cruise ship, and anyone – government or civilian – embarking and operating from them will need specialised preparation and training to ensure safe and effective performance of their roles.

There is little doubt that the amphibious capability development on which Australia has embarked not only embodies the shift from a reactionary defensive posture of Australia as a continent, to one of 'grasping the nettle' of Australia's littoral boundaries and beyond. It will also redefine the ways in which Australia's instruments of national power and engagement are applied to the region's security challenges of coming years.

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