

COMMENTARY

Australia's oceans strategy and the 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper

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Introduction

Later in 2017 the Turnbull government will issue a new Foreign Affairs White Paper.¹ According to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop the White Paper will be 'a philosophical framework to guide Australia's engagement, regardless of international events'. The White Paper will examine how to maximise Australia's 'influence through our policies, but also shape the thinking of other nations. It's about strategy – our global focus and our global interests'. The Foreign Minister has justified the requirement for a new White Paper by pointing out that, 'we need a contemporary foreign policy strategy; we are a significant regional voice; we have achieved a considerable amount over three years. This will look at the challenges, the threats, and the opportunities' (Massola 2016a).

Unlike Defence, that has regularly produced White Papers over the last decade, there has only been two Foreign Affairs White Papers and they were both from John Howard's government: the Rudd, Gillard and Abbott governments never produced Foreign Affairs White Papers. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet did, however, produce the Asian Century white paper for former Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The first Foreign Affairs White Paper was, *In the National Interest*, and it was released in 1997. The second, *Advancing the National Interest*, appeared in 2003 (Hawker 2016; Massola 2016b).

One observer has suggested that the 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper most likely would not end up being a strategy designed to shape a favourable future but instead be 'event driven' (Layton 2016).

But taking a more optimistic view the Australian National University's Hugh White has argued that the new White Paper should define in the broadest terms what our foreign policy is supposed to do, identify the features of our international environment that will do most to determine our security and prosperity over the next three or four decades and design specific long-term plans to address each of the interests that are decided. Finally, he notes that Australia will have to allocate resources to implement any plans that are developed (White 2016; Gyngell 2016).

Oceans and foreign policy

I would agree with Hugh White's broad requirements for what is required in Australia's 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper.

The oceans are a vital global and regional interest for Australia that present challenges, threats and opportunities. Recognising that fact can give the new White Paper policy punch, giving Australia and the region enduring benefits.

Australia's a three ocean country with significant national interests in the Pacific, Indian and Southern Oceans, as well as interests in the Coral Sea and in the Arafura and Timor seas.

Oceans define our geography. They are critical to our security, with our dependence on maritime commerce and the maintenance of freedom of movement for shipping.

The oceans link us with our trading partners, provide resources and wealth and offer a defence against possible aggression. The maritime domain over which Australia has some jurisdiction is nearly twice the area of the continental landmass of Australia. We have responsibility for a search and rescue area that is over one-tenth of the earth's surface. More than 75% of our exports and imports by value go by sea and over 99.9% by weight.

Our maritime borders require enforcement in the face of unregulated people movement, illegal fishing and goods, the safety of shipping and the introduction of marine pests (Bateman and Bergin 2009).

Australia's ocean industry sector contributes significantly to our national economy. By 2025, our oceans are expected to contribute \$100 billion per annum to our economy, up from the current \$47.2 billion annual contribution (excluding environmental services) (National Marine Science Committee 2015).

We have a clear obligation to protect the environment of our marine jurisdiction and conserve its living resources. But we still lack much of the scientific knowledge required to discharge this obligation effectively: we are still yet to explore more than 75% of our marine estate.

Leveraging the oceans for regional security and prosperity

Our foreign policy should help us shape a good law and order at sea in our regional environment and help us leverage economic benefits from our surrounding oceans and seas. Many of the features of our regional environment that will have a big impact on maximising Australia's security and prosperity have an oceanic dimension.

There can be no long-term stability in the South Pacific without the sustainability of its marine living resources. The region has the world's largest sustainable tuna fishery.

Our relations with Indonesia will be shaped by how that country is able to secure its own archipelagic waters. Peaceful relations among the major powers of Asia will depend on how they manage maritime conflicts in a region that is overwhelmingly maritime. The strategic relationship between the US and China will shape the Asian region for the rest of this century, so Australia has a vital interest in US and China maritime cooperation, rather than competition.

An open trading environment in Asia depends on the security of sea lanes. Effective global action on climate change is linked to the oceans that play a fundamental role in the climate system.

We are engaged in regional maritime security architecture through our involvement in bodies such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Western Pacific Naval Symposium, the Extended East Asia Maritime Forum, the East Asian Summit and the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies.

Domestic oceans policy is relevant

The Foreign Affairs White Paper should also set out in broad terms what is required for a decent domestic oceans policy. That will provide the framework in which Australia can meet global and regional challenges and opportunities with the oceans.

We need a coordinated whole-of-government approach to the blue economy. Public policy for the oceans is still largely determined on a sectoral basis. To reflect a truly whole-of-government approach, an Office of Oceans Affairs should be established in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. This central policy coordination of oceans affairs occurs in France, Japan and South Korea.

It would offer higher level oceans policy coordination than exists through the security focused Joint Agencies Maritime Advisory Group, chaired by Commander, Maritime Border Command, which oversees the development of capabilities and coordination issues in maritime surveillance and enforcement.

An Office of Ocean Affairs could generate an Outlook for Australia's Oceans which would look at status and trends in resources, natural and economic and social. It could be a risk assessment with a forward looking horizon and encourage policy and public debate about our nation's aspirations for the seas that surround us and on which we depend.

This would be timely as we approach the 20-year anniversary of the launch of Australia's Ocean Policy of 1998 (Bergin and Haward 1999; Haward and Vince 2009). Despite the promise of Oceans Policy as a basis for integrated oceans management, current oceans governance is partial and fragmented (Vince et al. 2015).

A smart nation in ocean affairs

The 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper should examine regional strategic issues with the oceans and commit to Australia to providing leadership in the Indo-Pacific in oceans affairs. Countries cannot be good at everything, but we should try to be a smart nation in ocean affairs.

Oceans policy should be centre stage in terms of our strategic relations in the Indo-Pacific: many of those countries have extensive maritime interests, including significant ocean zones that need to be managed.

To strengthen our Indo-Pacific oceans diplomacy and leadership we should appoint an Ambassador for the Oceans (as exists, e.g. in the Republic of Korea) to make the most of the political and economic opportunities from oceans policy for the region.

The new White Paper should commit Australia to developing an Australian maritime security strategy to provide strategic guidance to a wide range of agencies on delivering maritime security at the regional and international levels.

A good model has been produced by the UK (UK Government 2014), but there are other examples published by the US (Department of Defense 2015), the European Commission (European Commission 2014) and France (Inter-ministerial Sea Committee 2015).

The oceans and seas around Australia are central to our future prosperity and security. All countries share in both the benefits of safer and more secure oceans – and the responsibility for addressing major threats and challenges to maritime security.

Regional cooperation is fundamental to the maintenance of maritime security and safety, and Australia should be a leader in this regard in our adjacent oceans and seas.

Selected ocean issues

The Foreign Affairs White Paper might look at the *blue economy in the Indian and Pacific Ocean*, Australian skills and expertise in managing marine affairs and maritime space and drawing here on Australia's experience with oceans policy. This would also relate to opportunities for Australia to promote maritime cooperation in the South China Sea (see below).

The paper could set out *opportunities for maritime cooperation with Indonesia*, especially now that Indonesia is also now developing an oceans policy (Supriyanto 2016). It might for example look at working with Indonesia on key oceans issues such as measures to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and to manage tuna stocks, including of the valuable southern bluefin tuna. It could examine cooperation between the Australian Border Force and Indonesia's coastguard around issues of maritime domain awareness.

The White Paper could *look at other leading regional ocean countries such as South Korea, Japan, US, China where we have common ocean interests*.

In particular it might consider how the Australian Border Force might cooperate in *civil maritime policing with the growing number of regional coastguards* (Bateman 2006).

The White Paper should cover some of the *vital fisheries issues* that are significant renewable resources for Indian Ocean and Pacific Island countries. They underpin food supplies, maintain livelihoods and assist economic growth (Haward and Bergin 2016).

The White Paper could note how Australia can help in fisheries science, maritime surveillance and enforcement, and facilitating regional strategic discussions about sustainable returns from the use of fisheries resources.

That is because the stress living marine resources are being placed under will impact food security and economic development in the Indo-Pacific, with likely effects on political stability.

It is time we lifted our *fisheries engagement with China*, which has the largest distant water fishing fleet in the world, the operations of which are rapidly expanding. There are growing concerns about the low level of regulation of China's fleets (Lebling 2013). We should work to include fisheries matters on the agenda of the annual Australia–China High-Level Dialogue. Sustainable fisheries are important for regional political stability: it is not just about fish.

In the *South China Sea* the new Foreign Affairs White Paper could note how we might use greater cooperation in areas like marine scientific research (Boisseau du Rocher 2015), search and rescue, and marine environmental protection to help defuse tensions. Cooperation is a specific and joint responsibility of countries adjacent to an enclosed or semi-enclosed sea under the regime in UNCLOS Part IX.

The White Paper should note how Australia might promote cooperation in key regional forums that deal with maritime security: the expanded Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Maritime Forum (EAMF), the ASEAN Regional Forum inter-sessional meeting on maritime security, and the maritime security expert working group under the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus. None of those groups to date have really tackled maritime cooperation in the South China Sea.

Here the White Paper might examine the *potential of the EAMF*, which includes all members of the East Asia Summit (EAS). It looks at the full spectrum of maritime issues, and has now been given prominence in promoting maritime cooperation.

That is clear when we examine the statement that came out of the EAS Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 22 November 2015, 'EAS Statement on Enhancing Regional Maritime Cooperation' that Australia co-sponsored with Indonesia, New Zealand and importantly with both China and the US.

The statement specifically endorses the EAMF as an effective platform to 'constructively engage in open and substantive dialogue'. It encourages ASEAN to consider elevating the EAMF to include a dedicated Track 1 forum in addition to the 1.5 Track EAMF 'on the basis of consultation and consensus among EAMF participating countries'.

This important EAS document emphasises blue economy issues: it is focused on maritime cooperation generally, not harder maritime security cooperation. When it discusses 'incidents at sea', for example, it looks at search and rescue incidents.

The White Paper should point out the need to *focus on small 's' maritime security*, as opposed to harder military and political issues, as a means to reduce regional distrust.

One area the White Paper might note here is Australia *lifting innovation in ocean observation, modelling and data sharing*.

Several issues underwrite the need to rapidly improve our knowledge of regional oceans and seas: improving projections of regional, long-term change and variability (including extreme events and sea-level change), sustaining the productive capacity of the ocean's ecosystems as they come under increasing pressure from human activities, sustainably using marine ecosystem services, (such as food security and coastal protection), and increasing resilience of communities and economic infrastructure to the growing risk of exposure from marine related disasters caused by extreme events, such as hurricanes, storm surges and tsunamis.

The White Paper might highlight ways Australia could work with regional countries to reduce the time-lag between observations being made and the conclusions based on them being placed systematically and in coherent form into the regional policy arena.

We should not forget that in Australia's region there are lots of high seas beyond national jurisdiction. There are particular knowledge gaps in those areas, both spatially, as well as in the deep ocean below two kilometre depth.

It is really about gathering environmental intelligence for the oceans: understanding the ocean's role in climate change and the resultant weather pattern changes, sea-level rise, acidification, biodiversity and evolution of marine ecosystems functioning.

There is also the driver of the blue economy for our region, such as coastal aquaculture and hydrocarbon exploration in increasingly deep environments. Good order at sea and maritime security are important prerequisites for effective realisation of the Blue Economy.

Australia could support the capacity building of developing countries to monitor the oceans by, for example, installing tide gauges to quantify sea-level rise and predicting coastal flooding, delivering training in the use of freely available satellite information and assisting in the operation and usage of low cost (relative to ships).

Australia might engage more with the merchant shipping industry on their collaboration in ocean observation. Commercial vessels spend far more time at sea than research vessels.

In 2016 the G7 Science and Technology Ministers met in Tsukuba City, Japan. The Tsukuba communiqué states that the group believes that it is crucial to develop far

stronger scientific knowledge necessary to assess the ongoing ocean changes and develop appropriate policies to ensure the sustainable use of the seas and oceans.

They supported the development of an initiative for enhanced global sea and ocean observation required to monitor climate change and marine biodiversity, an enhanced system of ocean assessment through the UN Regular Process for Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of the Marine Environment to develop a consensus view on the state of the oceans, promote open science and improve the global data sharing infrastructure to ensure the discoverability, accessibility and interoperability of a wide range of ocean and marine data.

They agreed to strengthen collaborative approaches to encourage the development of regional observing capabilities and knowledge networks in a coordinated and coherent way.

Australia can play key role in advancing that ocean observation agenda through the Integrated Marine Observing System. Organisations like the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority can enhance future regional ocean observations. We are uniquely placed in the southern hemisphere to help countries test new technologies, like ocean gliders and autonomous systems (Integrated Marine Observing System 2016).

The Foreign Affairs White Paper might suggest that Australia support a strong ocean observation statement at Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Port Moresby in 2018 (Integrated Marine Observing System 2016). That would raise awareness of the value of earth and marine observation and data systems to support regional priorities and assist to prioritise regional marine observation needs.

Concluding remarks

The 2017 Foreign Affairs White paper should include as one of its themes Australia's civil oceans policy and its contribution to regional maritime security.

We could achieve much by exploiting the economic and strategic potential of the oceans, and at relatively little cost, but with enormous political benefit.

We should view the seas as a bridge that links Australia with the world. This demands planning and strategy: it is why it is important that Australia's forthcoming Foreign Affairs White Paper pay due regard to the oceans.

Note

1. The Turnbull government has called for public submissions to the White Paper and will conduct public consultations around Australia in preparing the document. see <http://dfat.gov.au/whitepaper/index.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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