

Comment by Michael C H Jones
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Several Australian Governments ago in the era of Kevin07 at a conference I asked the then Defence Minister about naval capabilities in the Southern Ocean, and received the rather supercilious reply that Australia had no fear of the penguins. There appeared to be little understanding of initiatives by other countries including China and Russia in the region, particularly Antarctica.

At the time Australia also declined to cooperate in joint naval exercises with Japan and India in concert with the US. The GFC and revitalised G20 together with the Beijing Olympic Games were on everyone's mind. Then came in 2009 the Fiji military coup and Australia's logistical incapacity to impose it's will presuming it had wanted to. The near-thing of failure in East Timor was well remembered.

Australia therefore approaches 2016, the US Presidential election, and 2017, the half-way mark for PRC President Xi, with asymmetrical security and trade policies - as if there is little relationship between the two. The South China Sea is the current zone of contention with ASEAN, China, India, Japan and USA as well as Australia all having vital strategic interests, political and economic.

Yet the flashpoint could involve any one of a range of contentious issues in the Pacific re the Koreas, Chinese Taipei/Taiwan and Hong Kong SAR; or Indian Ocean re West Asia - Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Israel. Australian naval, air and troop capabilities in cooperation with allies will continue to be tested.

What so far has not appeared on the thinking radar are potential tensions in the Southern Ocean, not just on the South African and Chile/Argentine peripheries, but much closer to our shores in the South West Pacific, Antarctica and the Ocean Region generally. Australia requires an integrated Three Oceans Policy linking security and economics.

This Three Oceans Policy will take a decade to formulate and implement. Its parameters are likely to combine elements of past doctrines focused on the Asia-Pacific. However the threats will inevitable change and in ways not presently anticipated. For example Japan is likely to fall back to a major regional power in the North East Pacific similar to the rise of Iran as a major regional power in the North West Indian. However India and China in their rivalry will also challenge the present US all-round military predominance with associated implications for Australia by mid-century. The weight of Sino-Indian economic power will perhaps inadvertently heighten Australia's security risks, and especially if military alliances eventuate.

The resources of the oceans and the polar regions are already in contention in the North, and the same will inevitably occur in the South. Australia as a democracy needs to start the policy debate in the very near future.