Australian think-tank recommends military build-up in Indian Ocean

Nick Sutton
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A report issued by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a Canberra-based government funded think-tank, has called on the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to strengthen Australia's military and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean region. The study, entitled "Our Western Front: Australia and the Indian Ocean" and authored by Anthony Bergin of ASPI and Sam Bateman of the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security, was prompted by mounting great power rivalries in the region.

"The Indian Ocean has become the focus of increasing strategic and political attention," the report explained. "Australia should be a pre-eminent country in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), but we've neglected it in favour of the Pacific." ASPI described a "new era of external involvement" in the region, driven by "energy politics and the emergence of China as a new and powerful regional player" as well as piracy near the Horn of Africa. The report frankly stated: "Ostensibly the role of the warships [deployed by the US, France, China, and other countries] is to counter piracy, but they also serve a wider strategic purpose ... when piracy is reduced, not all will return to their home bases".

The report continued: "A new maritime 'great game' is emerging in the IOR, as strategic competition between India and China becomes evident. Each has fears of being contained by the other—in China's case, because India is supported by Japan and the US. Meanwhile, the US continues to dominate the IOR strategically and militarily. India promotes itself as the dominant power of the region. It's obsessed by China's entry into the IOR and is making great use of its navy to spread power and influence."

ASPI stressed Australia's interests in the region. The waters off northwest Australia contain massive oil and gas deposits. The Gorgon gas project, for example, is developing a field reported to be the equivalent of 8 percent of current world liquefied natural gas (LNG) capacity, worth approximately $200 billion in supply contracts. A series of other major gas projects may lead to Australia becoming the world's leading LNG exporter by the end of the decade.

ASPI noted: "The greatest challenges to the protection of our offshore sovereignty and sovereign rights lie in the Indian Ocean. About one-third of our exports emanate from Western Australia, and major offshore developments under way off the west and northwest of the continent will be a key to our future prosperity. We need to work harder to plan for critical infrastructure protection, and the Australian Defence Force should increase its presence in this area."

The think-tank recommended the establishment of a major new naval base in the northwest to "close the gap" between Perth and Darwin, greater use of the existing Curtin and Learmonth air force bases in the area, and increased frequency of military exercises.

ASPI called for greater diplomatic efforts to defuse mounting tensions. Among the report's recommendations were the convening of an "Indian Ocean Conference" in Perth, the Western Australian state capital, to involve regional governments as well as others, including the US, China, Japan, and the European Union. The conference would discuss cooperation on a range of issues, such as "energy issues, ocean management, fisheries management, natural hazard mitigation and marine scientific research". ASPI recommended, however, that "traditional security issues" ought not to be put on the agenda due to "the potential sensitivities involved".

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This reference to "sensitivities" is a measure of the tensions that have rapidly emerged. ASPI acknowledged that a regional war could erupt in the future—giving the report's title, "Our Western Front", an ominous character.

ASPI noted that the Indian Ocean's periphery includes three of the most strategically sensitive energy supply routes—"the Babe el Mandeb Strait between Djibouti and Yemen, leading to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal; the Strait of Hormuz between Iran and Oman leading to the Persian Gulf; and the Malacca strait between Indonesia and Malaysia, leading through the Singapore Strait into the South China sea". It concluded: "The politics of oil and energy are likely to have a powerful impact on the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean, and won't necessarily be conducive to cooperation. Growing military capabilities across the region may also inhibit cooperation by reinforcing perceptions of long-standing military threats and creating a security dilemma for regional countries."

The ASPI report shed further light on the strategic dilemma confronting the Australian ruling elite, with a contradiction emerging between its historical reliance on a military and strategic alliance with US imperialism and its economic dependence on China and East Asia. The think-tank stressed that Australia and the US had different relations with both India and China.

"[Australia's] relationship with India must be one of equal partners," the report stated. "This might be hard: India seems reluctant to treat Australia on an equal basis. This will create problems should India extend its reach and influence into areas of common strategic interest... India clearly plans to be the dominant power in the Indian Ocean. This presents challenges and opportunities for Australia. We're yet to see how responsible India will be in playing a dominant role. India's expansion, or even hegemony, in the Indian Ocean mightn't always be in Australia's interests, but we're in no position to compete."

ASPI had fewer qualms about Beijing increasing its presence in the region, contrary to Washington's position. The report stated: "Australia's primary alliance relationship with the US extends into the Indian Ocean region. However there's a possibility that our interests and policies mightn't always coincide with those of the US, especially with some aspects of the US transfer of technology to India, and the exchange of military doctrine and intelligence. Differing perspectives on the presence of China in the IOR may be at the heart of these policy disconnects, with Australia being less confident than the US that a powerful India will be a more benign presence in the region than a powerful China."

The report does not have anything to say about the main destabilising factor in the region—the eruption of US militarism. As part of its "war on terror", the Obama administration is waging an intensifying war to secure its neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, a proxy war in neighbouring Pakistan and threatening Iran. Its developing strategic ties with India are part of a strategy of encircling China and countering its influence in South Asia. The US is hostile to any Chinese challenge to its longstanding naval dominance in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans and its strategy of controlling key naval "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait along sea routes between the Middle East and North East Asia. Far from playing a "moderating role", as the report suggests, the US is intensifying the danger of new wars in the region.

The omission is not accidental. While the US actions are compounding the dilemmas facing Canberra, successive Australian governments—Labor and Liberal-National coalition—have unconditionally supported the US alliance and its war in Afghanistan, including with the presence of Australian troops. Any Australian military build-up in the Indian Ocean will undoubtedly take place in the closest cooperation and collaboration with the White House and the Pentagon.

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