Shaping Australia's international environment by Sea Power

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This paper is a brief examination of how Australia can use sea power to shape its strategic environment. It addresses how sea power can affect the future behaviour of regional actors through shaping their expectations of the likely consequences of their choices and actions. The Author emphasise the deterrence side of Sea Power dynamics, and how operational exercises can be used to shape observers' expectations on the likely consequences and reactions of others to their potential actions.

Key words: sea power; deterrence; naval power; offensive sea control; defensive sea control; offensive sea denial; defensive sea denial; defence strategy.

On 2 August 2022, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan. The reaction from Beijing was as swift as it was predictable. The Chinese military began a series of naval exercises around Taiwan with some of the declared live-fire areas crossing within Taiwanese territorial waters. This was unpreceded. The 1995-96 Taiwan Crisis live-fire areas had crossed the median line between the mainland and Taiwan but not Taiwanese territorial waters.

Some analysts, however, saw the potential silver-lining to these exercises. At the time, retired Australian Major General Mick Ryan, for instance, took to Twitter to argue that: "the coming days will permit us to observe how China and the PLA might think about conducting a naval blockade of Taiwan. In essence, they are telegraphing their operational approach so we can war game ways to subvert it in the future." Similarly, Professor John Blaxland, from the Australian National University, tweeted that: "Beijing's largest-ever exercises around Taiwan have offered key clues into its plans for a gruelling blockade in the event of a war to take the self-ruled island, and revealed an emboldened Chinese military whose plans are worth studying." Neither Ryan nor Blaxland are wrong.

The PLA exercises provided an excellent opportunity to observe how the PLA could undertake a blockade of Taiwan. To the Southeast of Taiwan, near the Bashi Canal, which is the main gateway between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea, we saw significant surface activity as well as overflights. This suggests that China may attempt to use its surface and submarine fleets to prevent the use of the canal to Taiwanese and American forces. Closer to Taiwan we observed fewer surface warships and instead there were more overflights and missile tests, particularly in the southwest and east. Clearly, both Ryan and Blaxland were onto something. We can study China's exercise for clues into how a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would likely be conducted.

Their analysis, however, is missing a key ingredient. Their observations overlook the fact that the Chinese knew that we are watching. So, on the one hand, the PLA exercises are likely genuine examples of how China plans to conduct a blockade of Taiwan. But, on the other hand, the exercises were theatre. The Chinese were telling the Taiwanese and the wider international community a story about how a blockade would likely be conducted. The moral of the story – at least from Beijing's point of view – was that Taiwan should forget about independence and the international community should think twice about coming to Taipei's aid. Like many stories, the exercises were a warning. What Ryan and Blaxland's analysis misses is the fact that these exercises were not a sneak peek behind the curtain. Beijing did not unwittingly give away its war plans. These exercises were a deliberate reveal. They were *strategic communication* or, in the ADF's current preferred parlance, the exercises were for *information effects*.

Sea Power and Deterrence

This paper is a brief examination of how Australia can use sea power to shape its strategic environment. It addresses how sea power can affect the future behaviour of regional actors through shaping their expectations of the likely consequences of their choices and actions. It directly builds upon my work on Australia's defence strategy that I presented the last time I addressed RUSI DSS NSW (Lockyer, 2015; Lockyer 2017a; Lockyer 2017b).

Sea power is an incredibly flexible instrument. Nations can use it as a functional tool to counter illegal fishing or humanitarian aid & disaster relief, right

through to actual warfighting. Nations, however, can also use naval exercises to tell a story to different foreign actors. This might be a story of deterrence or reassure. Due to time and space restrictions, in this paper I will concentrate upon the deterrence side of the equation, and how exercises can be used to shape observers' expectations on the likely consequences and reactions of others to their potential actions.

Put simply, deterrence is a threat. That is, if you do X, we will do Y, so you better not do X. Deterrence increases the expected costs and risks associated with a future action in the minds of an opposing decision maker (Lockyer 2020). Nations can use conventional sea power for deterrence in several different ways.

Until the second half of the 20th Century, the central concept within naval theory was "command of the seas". Under this concept, rival fleets – generally imagined as either being the British and French, or the British and the German fleets – would attempt to sink or blockade the opposing fleet. If successful, command of the sea would grant the victor unrestricted use of world's seas, to raid their foe's commerce and to conduct from the sea operations, including amphibious landings or naval bombardments. In the 1970s, however, naval thinking began to move away from command of the seas and began to emphasise "sea control". Rather than expecting to achieve complete and unrestricted domination of the world's seas following a pitched naval battle, sea control reimagined the concept in a far more limited and restricted way. Sea control is when a naval force possesses local maritime supremacy at a particular place, for limited time. In contrast with command of the sea, sea control is temporally and spatially restricted (Till 2003).

The ability to achieve sea control can be marshalled and moulded into a deterrence strategy in in several different ways. The precise story can be communicated through naval exercises. Indeed, the exercise "scenario" itself is a vision of the future where a foreign force does X, and the naval exercise demonstrates its ability and resolve to do Y.

Sea Power and Deterrence

Nations can potentially threaten to hurt another with their naval power through four broad strategies: *offensive sea control, defensive sea control, offensive sea denial and defensive sea denial.*

First, offensive sea control involves a nation being able to reach out and seize sea control in an opponent's maritime periphery and, from this space, undertake different forms of power projection operations. For example, the deterrer could threaten to seize sea control and then undertake airstrikes, bombardment, amphibious assault, missile strikes or blockade onto the opponent's homeland. This is the story that the US Navy has primarily told the world. That is, the US Navy's aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships can operate from forward areas anywhere in the world. To drive home that message, the US Navy conducts naval exercises in forward areas. For example, the US Navy regularly conducts forward exercises in the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, where it practices seizing sea control and then projecting power ashore.

Second, alternately nations can attempt to demonstrate defensive sea control. Defensive sea control prevents an opponent from deploying significant forces into an area. Generally, this will be into the areas that the deterrer considers to be its "home waters". The deterrence message is simple: "you cannot deploy forces into this area, so don't". Deterring opponents through defensive sea control holds several advantages, particularly for nations confronting opponents with superior naval aviation as the deterrer can compensate through leveraging land-based air power and other capabilities. Bernard Cole describes China's A2/AD strategy as the "great wall at sea" (Cole 2001). Similarly, the Defence of Australia (DoA) policy, as spelt out by the 1986 Dibb Report and the 1987 Defence White Paper, outlined how Australia would deter an attack on the continent by demonstrating the capability to prevent any potential attacker from crossing the "air-sea" gap to Australia's north. That is, any attempt to fly or sail through the maritime environment to Australia's north could be defeated – outright – which would deter any other nations from attempting the feat in the first place. This was an example of deterrence by defensive sea control.

Sea denial differs from sea control in that the deterrer is not attempting to use the sea themselves. They are simply attempting to prevent the opponent from gaining control. Stansfield Turner describes sea denial as "guerrilla warfare at sea" (Turner 1977: 347). That is, guerrillas usually do not control territory, but they can prevent the government from exercising control over an area. In turn, governments will unlikely allow high value assets into areas that it does not feel that it adequately controls. During the Afghanistan conflict, for instance, a foreign delegation's importance could be calculated by how far they were allowed to venture from secure locations. Indeed, the highest valued visitors rarely left Bagram Airport. Sea denial applies a similar logic to deterrence at sea. That is, a deterrer might not be able to credibly threaten an opponent through either offensive or defensive sea control, but they might still be able to prevent them from achieving sea control themselves and placing their high value assets at risk.

The third approach to using sea power as a deterrence instrument is through offensive sea denial. It can take the form of threatening to undertake commerce raiding, mining an opponent's ports or offensive submarine warfare. When commerce raiding

or conducting submarine activity, the deterrer does not possess sea control themselves they are simply preventing the opponent from possessing it and then exploiting their vulnerabilities.

There are a few historical examples of offensive sea denial being used as a deterrence strategy. In 1863, during the Polish Insurgency against the Russian Empire, both France and Britain looked poised to intervene on the side of the rebellious Poles. Indeed, France and Britain had fomented the conflict to begin with. In response, Russia ordered its Pacific Fleet to San Francisco and its Atlantic Fleet to New York. The message sent to both London and Paris was that if they decided to intervene, then these forces would be able to threaten the sea lanes of communication to North America. Although it is impossible to precisely know the degree to which the Russian deployment influenced Britain and France's eventual decision not to intervene in Poland, it was very likely an important contributing factor. Defending their long sea lanes to North America from commerce raiding would have been a costly and time-consuming operation, which likely outweighed the political benefit from helping the Polish rebels (which was always a rather peripheral foreign policy aim). An interesting side note was that the Union did not see the arrival of the Russian warships through the prism of Polish rebellion, but rather as a sign of support in the American Civil War – a conflict where the other major European powers had remains aloof or even were suspected of holding sympathies for the Confederacy.

Defensively, sea denial can also be used as a deterrence strategy. Defenders can threaten to mine defensively or use submarines and fast attack boats that would deny the opponent from achieving sea control. Hugh White (2019) advocates this approach for Australia. White argues that the Asia of today is a very different place to the 1980s. Australia can no longer hope to stop an opponent outright through the air-sea gap. However, Australia can acquire 20-plus conventional attack submarines and scatter them across its northern waters. At this point, White believes no opponent would dare deploy their aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships or troop transports into seas where these submarines might be lurking to ambush them. In other words, Australia can deter a conventional attack through sea denial rather than possessing sea control itself.

Sea Power and Strategic Communication

Nations will attempt to predict how others will react to their actions. This might be more challenging than it first appears. Sea power is extremely flexible, and the same units can be used in different ways. Moreover, a nation may threaten to retaliate in different ways in different area, at different times. For instance, during the Cold War the Soviet Union used a mixture of the four strategies outlined above in its attempt to deter the United States and the NATO nations from initiating an attack.

Closer to its coastline, the Soviet Navy planned to seize and hold defensive sea control. That is, in these areas it would not permit the American aircraft carriers from entering through a concentration of surface warships, submarines and land-based aircraft and missiles. Further out, the Soviet Navy designated a sea denial zone. In this area, Soviet attack submarines and long range bombers (including Backfires and Badgers) would hold the US Navy's aircraft carriers at risk.

In addition, the Soviet Navy also trained to conduct amphibious landings in the Baltic and Mediterranean seas, which suggests that in certain contingencies they may respond through an offensive sea control strategy.

The intelligence agencies in United States and other Western nations invested vast resources in attempting to uncover how the Soviet Union would respond in different contingencies. Moscow, however, was also attempting to communicate to the West how they would do so – through their naval exercises. The Soviet naval planners could rely upon NATO shadowing their exercises and producing a detailed account of their forces' intent, tactics and capabilities. So, exercises themselves were part of a deliberate strategic communication campaign that was built around specific scenarios. Moscow trained frequently, in the open, on a scale that would not make sense to be misdirection. This is like China's recent exercises around Taiwan. They are intended to be a warning as much as they are to train crews, test tactics and develop doctrine. They offer onlookers – both friends and foes – a detailed overview of how these nations plan on responding in specific contingencies and their ability to carry out their threats.

Australia's Naval Exercises and Strategic Communication

So what does this mean for Australia? The choice of deterrence strategy will, to an large extent, rest on the relative balance of naval power. A more capable power would likely favour offensive sea control and project power ashore via amphibious landings, air-strikes or blockade. When the opponent possesses greater parity with the deterrer, the latter may seek to tilt the balance decisively in their favour by also throwing their land-based capabilities onto the scales – and seek to deter attack via defensive sea control. A significantly weaker actor would, in contrast, choose to play the role of guerrilla and deter through threatened sea denial strategy.

Commentators, analysts and academics frequently argue that Australia requires a defence strategy that will deter opponents from undertaking adverse actions against its interests. They often speak in terms of one defence strategy. The problem with this approach is

that Australia has a range of interests that could potentially be harmed by weaker powers, peers and more powerful states. Australia is a great power in the South Pacific and, if its interests were threatened by – or in – one of the small South Pacific nations then it might be expected to conduct offensive sea control operations. Australia is a middle power in Asia. As such, if it was threatened by a peer competitor it might attempt to fight and win at sea in its near seas to also draw upon land-based air power. Globally, however, Australia is a relatively small naval power. If it ever finds itself in a conflict, alone, against a great naval power than it would likely pursue a form of offensive and defensive sea denial.

Australia's current mix of exercises communicate as much. It uses its balanced force to practice all these strategies in a range of different contingencies. OCEAN EXPLORER, for example, is an exercise that is conducted in Australian waters. Different iterations are deliberately moved around the Australian coastline with the stated intent of providing our sailors and naval officers with experience in different environments. It is a sea control exercise. Taken together it is defensive sea control exercise. TALISMAN SABER, in contrast, has a much greater emphasis on amphibious activities. This is Australia's major offensive sea control exercise. Australia also conducts mine-warfare exercises and other activities that could be described as demonstrations of sea denial capabilities.

Yet, the strategic communication component in the planning of Australia's exercises remains underdeveloped. Australia is aware that China – and other regional actors – observe its major naval exercises. Indeed, it would be strange if a Chinese AGI did not make an appearance near exercises such as TALISMAN SABER. Australia has an audience. The strategic message, however, is not always clear and investing more effort into the show will likely produce disproportionate returns on invest. I am aware that academics, think tankers, and other arm-chair strategists routinely argue that Australia must invest more "here" or do more "there" all the while practitioners struggle to accomplish and pay for the tasks they already have. Maritime resources are finite and the the ADF's responsibilities are broad and continue to broaden. However, exercises remain one of the best means to shape and influence friends and opponents' expectations on one's response to different contingencies and a relatively small investment of time and effort in improving and sharpening their strategic message could have disproportionate effects.

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