

Island Australia: improving resilience in a rapidly-changing region

The contribution of the Royal Australian Navy to improving resilience



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During the COVID-19 pandemic of the last two years, the personal and professional resilience of the personnel of the Royal Australian Navy, together with that of their families, has been an important contributor to the economic and security resilience of Australia and its neighbourhood and region.

Key words: Royal Australian Navy; COVID-19; economic resilience; maritime commons; maritime trade; national resilience; personal resilience; professional resilience; regional resilience; security resilience.

It is a pleasure to speak here today in such fine company. I am honoured to be delivering this speech as the Commander of the Australian Fleet. I will speak briefly of personal and team resilience in the context of service to our nation, before expanding to the larger issue of national and regional economic and security resilience.

Personal and Team Resilience

Today, as is the case almost every day, nearly 2000 men and women of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) are at sea in 22 ships and submarines, with more than 800 personnel force-assigned to the Chief of Joint Operations, serving from the coast of Australia to as far north as the waters of Japan. These people provide the visible embodiment of Australian Government policy across the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian Navy ships and submarines have maintained our commitment to training, certification and operational activities across the Indo-Pacific - from Canada and the United States in the east, to India and Sri Lanka in the west, and to Japan and South Korea in the north.

Your Navy's resilience and professionalism are underlined by the fact that these operations have been carried out despite the ever-present risk of COVID-19. Sometimes crews have deployed from cities in lockdown, such as Sydney, leaving families behind to face the challenges alone, while our crews deployed conducting disaster-relief, other operations and contactless port visits, sometimes returning months later straight into lockdown in their home port. This is a demanding operating context and we should all be proud of the professionalism and resilience of our people.

That said, Service is not about overcoming personal challenges in order to serve a higher purpose. It is really important that we continue to be able to operate both domestically and overseas, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and I am proud of the way our ships' companies have resolutely performed their duties.

For example, there was a request by New South Wales Health for Australian Defence Force (ADF) assistance to help with the vaccination outreach and roll in regional New South Wales. The ADF organised 70 personnel very quickly and deployed them to Dubbo in the Western New South Wales Area Health zone. The 70 personnel were divided into five vaccination outreach teams. The ADF vaccination outreach teams were able to administer 50,600 vaccinations, meaning they dealt with 50,000+ members of the public in a community that was very anxious about their own health outcomes. It was a very rewarding experience for those involved, with countless numbers of lives saved and a high level of positive community engagement by the ADF and a visible reduction in vaccine hesitancy within communities.

We also mobilised *HMAS Adelaide* at short notice to support Fiji following a devastating cyclone in December 2020. In the words of one young sailor:

"It was honestly the most rewarding thing that I've done in my career. I think these are the sorts of trips that personally I joined for. I remember that in 2016 a similar thing happened in Fiji. They had a cyclone and HMAS Canberra went for that one. I was still in training, so I wasn't able to go. I remember saying to myself these are the types of trips that I want to go on. So, I was really grateful to be able to go and, being from Fiji, it meant a whole lot to me."

As you can see, our sailors understand that their personal and team resilience directly contributes to our national resilience, but also to the wider interests of our region. As we begin another high-risk weather season, our ships and crews again stand ready to provide a broad range of assistance to the states and territories of Australia, but also to respond to our neighbours in their times of need. Whether that be evacuating Australians to avoid the effects of bushfires or floods, or deploying into the region to provide emergency relief after cyclones and earthquakes. There is also a strong connective tissue between personal, professional and national resilience.

Security and Economic Resilience

We are a maritime nation. This land, girt by sea, relies on the freedom of the maritime commons for our prosperity and, therefore, our security and economic resilience.

Our maritime context beyond our beaches is easy to comprehend – it is a series of gateways and maritime roads.

To our North lies the extraordinarily complex and diverse Indonesian archipelago – our gateway to South East Asia; to its East the Coral Sea – our gateway to the islands of the South West Pacific; and to our West lies the mighty Indian Ocean – our gateway to the subcontinent and beyond.

These are the sea based ‘roads and suburbs’ that constitute our neighbourhood and your Navy is in many respects your ‘neighbourhood watch’ – enabling connectivity with our partners and neighbours as well as timely assessment of emerging risks and issues across our vital terrain.

It is this terrain through which our import/export economy passes.

We are the fifth largest user of shipping services globally; over 98% of our imports and exports – and over 79% by volume – are dependent upon shipping that travels through the Indo-Pacific, and beyond. And our financial system is largely enabled by, and reliant on, the many intercontinental cables that run along the sea floor. In pre-COVID terms this trade accounted for over \$600

billion per annum, making relevant geography in the maritime commons our vital national terrain.

COVID-19 has impacted seaborne global supply chains, while regional tensions have impacted our trading relationships. Illegal fishing has not subsided during the pandemic. Piracy, drug smuggling and other sea based criminal activities have continued, while foreign intelligence collection ships and war ships have operated in close proximity to our coast over the past two years.

Collectively, these issues manifest as risks to our economic wellbeing, national security and resilience.

In this sense our Navy’s ability to sustain maritime operations and COVID support activities despite the pandemic has projected strength in the face of adversity, and signalled our steadfast readiness to monitor and protect our vital interests. In doing so we have enhanced our reputation for professionalism and resilience - at home and abroad – an achievement all Australians can be proud of.

Conclusion

I have focused on the Royal Australian Navy for obvious reasons, but in closing I offer that the personal and professional resilience of our people across the Defence enterprise, and their families, is equally and directly connected to national and regional resilience and our economic wellbeing – as I am sure my fellow environmental Commanders will attest.