

Australia Needs to Bolster Its Naval Capability as China Increases Incursions

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People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) Intelligence Collection Vessel Haiwangxing operating off the north-west shelf of Australia in an image supplied on May 13, 2022. Courtesy of the Australian Department of Defence

OPINION

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Print

Commentary

The growing frequency of [Chinese incursions near Australian waters](#) underscores an escalating threat to Australia's national security and regional stability. Chinese naval forces and fishing fleets have engaged in activities near Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), raising concerns about sovereignty and resource security.

Australia has recognized the need to expand its naval capabilities to deter these incursions; however, critical questions remain on the structure and effectiveness of its maritime defense strategy. To counter these emerging threats, Australia must enhance its maritime defense and amphibious capabilities by adopting a structured approach grounded in U.S. Navy and Marine Corps principles—specifically, sea control, power projection, and expeditionary logistics.

Current gaps in Australia's defense posture reveal the pressing need for new capabilities. These gaps include the [lack of offshore staging areas](#) for force projection and sustainment, insufficient platforms for reconnaissance, and an inadequate fleet of amphibious support ships. Without these assets, Australia faces limitations in both reach and resilience, making it challenging to maintain an effective defense stance in its surrounding waters.

Australia's naval forces, while modern and capable, currently lack the scale and logistical infrastructure to sustain operations far from shore bases. With strategic sea routes and valuable offshore resources at risk, addressing these deficiencies is urgent. To deter conflict and maintain regional stability, Australia must expand its capability set to give Beijing pause.

Australia can benefit by adopting the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps' frameworks of [Distributed Maritime Operations \(DMO\)](#) and [Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations \(EABO\)](#). These concepts offer actionable plans for establishing Floating Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) through multipurpose vessels (MPSVs) and Mobile Offshore Bases (MOBs). These floating bases provide distributed force sustainment, repairs, and logistics staging, enabling scalable force projection with minimal reliance on shore-based facilities.



Such FOBs are valuable assets in the Indo-Pacific, where shore bases may be limited, vulnerable to attack, or politically challenging to establish. By incorporating MPSVs and MOB, Australia can deploy a flexible maritime force capable of responding to multiple threats across vast oceanic areas. This suite of capabilities would serve not only as a deterrent but also as a mechanism to interdict PRC gray-zone activities, including harassment of fishing fleets, surveillance, and unmarked military vessels operating in Australia's vicinity.

Maintaining logistics chains in contested waters is critical to sustaining maritime operations, especially in scenarios where traditional supply routes may be compromised. The integration of [autonomous surface and subsurface vessels](#) into Australia's logistics chain can play a crucial role in mitigating personnel risk while providing essential resupply operations.

International vendors—many of whom already collaborate with the U.S. Navy—offer Australia a proven array of autonomous platforms for logistics and reconnaissance. These autonomous systems can operate in high-risk areas with limited human oversight, ensuring that essential supplies like fuel, munitions, and medical support reach forward operating units even under hostile conditions.

Initial autonomous platforms can be rapidly sourced from partners in North America, Europe, and Israel, while partnerships with Australian manufacturers can enable local production, thereby strengthening the domestic supply chain. This approach accelerates platform deployment, provides resilient sustainment options, and bolsters Australia's maritime independence.

China's increasing naval presence necessitates that Australia not only defend its territorial waters but also project force into contested regions when necessary.

To meet these needs, Australia should commission or modify landing platforms capable of supporting rapid amphibious assaults, force insertion, and recovery operations. Inspired by the U.S. Marine Corps' EABO and [Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment \(LOCE\)](#)

[concepts](#), these platforms serve as force multipliers, projecting power into contested littorals and enabling distributed operations across the Indo-Pacific.

By establishing partnerships with international shipbuilders in South Korea, Japan, and select European nations, Australia can expedite the acquisition of new amphibious platforms that meet specific expeditionary requirements.

These shipbuilders have the expertise and manufacturing capabilities to deliver advanced, resilient amphibious vessels within shorter timeframes. Furthermore, Australia can retrofit existing large commercial offshore support vessels (OSVs) for amphibious roles. This retrofit strategy can reduce procurement costs, shorten timelines, and enable a rapid transition to operational readiness.

In addition, these amphibious platforms could play a vital role in allied exercises and regional partnerships, reinforcing Australia's commitment to joint defense initiatives. Amphibious ships with advanced capabilities would not only support Australia's national security but also strengthen relationships with Pacific allies, providing a unified deterrent against PRC aggression.

Australia's defense strategy is incomplete without the active engagement of its regional allies. The recent decision to collaborate with [Japan on long-range missile systems](#) marks a significant step in bolstering Indo-Pacific security. Partnerships with countries like Japan, the United States, South Korea, and regional players such as the Philippines enable shared intelligence, joint exercises, and collaborative response planning.

In the face of growing Chinese assertiveness, these alliances are critical. [Joint exercises](#) in amphibious operations, combined fleet maneuvers, and multi-domain integration will be invaluable for ensuring that Australia and its partners can rapidly respond to threats. Expanding intelligence-sharing agreements and conducting regular joint maritime patrols could further enhance situational awareness and reinforce the collective commitment to regional stability.

With China's military capabilities expanding and its regional assertiveness intensifying, Australia faces a narrowing procurement window. While recent steps, such as [cooperation with Japan](#), underscore Australia's commitment to regional defense partnerships, they are only the beginning of what's needed. To secure its national interests and preserve stability in the Indo-Pacific, Australia must act decisively to enhance its maritime defense capabilities.

Strategic investments in naval force projection, amphibious readiness, and autonomous logistics platforms are essential to maintaining a credible deterrent posture. Failure to act now may result in a diminished ability to respond effectively to future crises, risking Australia's sovereignty, and its role as a stabilizing force in the region. The time to invest in an expanded, resilient maritime capability is now, as Australia navigates a more contested and complex security environment.

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