

## **STRATEGIC FRONTIERS: MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE, INTEROPERABILITY, AND THE AUSTRALIA INDONESIA SECURITY NEXUS**

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The recalibration of Australia's strategic posture, as articulated in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR), marks a decisive inflection point in its maritime defence orientation. While framed largely in terms of deterrence and strategic denial, this transformation carries broader implications for regional diplomacy and multilateral security cooperation particularly in relation to Indonesia, Australia's closest maritime neighbour and a critical Indo-Pacific actor. Australia's renewed emphasis on its northern defence infrastructure not only reflects a growing concern with the encroachment of major powers in its immediate region but also gestures towards a potential reimagining of maritime partnerships through deeper interoperability and collaborative capability building.

Australia's geostrategic position, flanked to the north by the Indonesian

archipelago, places immense operational and strategic importance on the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) threading through Southeast Asia. Access to the South China Sea, the broader Indo-Pacific theatre, and even the Indian Ocean is predicated on secure and sustained transit through these vital waters. The operational freedom of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), especially its submarine and long-range surface assets, hinges on continued maritime stability across the Timor Sea, Arafura Sea, and crucial Indonesian straits such as Lombok and Makassar. Consequently, Indonesia's role as both a geographical gatekeeper and a regional strategic balancer necessitates a bilateral relationship that goes beyond conventional diplomacy to encompass tangible interoperability, logistical coordination, and real-time operational integration.

The strategic rationale underpinning this push for closer cooperation is embedded within the broader contours of Australia's evolving defence posture. As a middle power, Australia's security calculus has become increasingly shaped by the shifting balance of power between the United States and China, particularly in the maritime domain. The intensification of grey-zone operations, assertive territorial claims, and the growing risk of miscalculation at sea have prompted a strategic reassessment within Canberra. While Australia remains aligned with U.S.-led security architectures, including the AUKUS agreement and the Quad framework, it also recognises the indispensable value of bilateral and subregional partnerships. Among these, Indonesia stands out not only for its proximity but for its maritime centrality and growing strategic ambition.

Australia's strategic doctrine, as codified in the DSR, reflects a shift from expeditionary ambitions towards a "strategy of denial." This posture, while ostensibly defensive, necessitates an assertive presence in proximate waters and a credible capacity to deny adversaries freedom of manoeuvre. The

emphasis on denial does not preclude cooperation; rather, it foregrounds a form of regional engagement anchored in shared threat perceptions, joint capability development, and infrastructural interoperability. Within this framework, the redevelopment of northern infrastructure—most notably HMAS Coonawarra and the commissioning of Kuru Wharf—should be viewed not merely as deterrence measures but as enabling assets for coalition-building and joint operations.

HMAS Coonawarra, transformed over the past decade from a limited patrol base into a minor fleet facility, now possesses the capability to host frigates, destroyers, and amphibious assets such as Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs). The increased berthing capacity and logistical depth provided by the commissioning of Kuru Wharf in 2024 represent a material leap in Australia's maritime posture. This facility, previously constrained by shallow wharf pockets and commercial dependencies, can now organically support sustained operations by both Australian and partner-nation vessels. Importantly, its secure configuration contrasts sharply with the politically

contentious commercial wharves at Darwin Port, which remain under foreign lease a situation that continues to generate unease in Canberra.

In this context, Indonesia emerges as the most logical and strategic beneficiary of Australian logistical support and basing cooperation. The Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Laut (TNI-AL), which has articulated ambitions for regional fleet projection under Indonesia's "Global Maritime Fulcrum" doctrine, could significantly extend its operational reach through increased access to northern Australian facilities. Facilitating such access through tailored port agreements, reciprocal training arrangements, and shared logistics protocols would not only support Indonesia's maritime aspirations but also embed it more deeply within a collective regional security architecture.

The expansion of HMAS Coonawarra and the strategic push "above the 26th parallel" must be conceptualised as more than a reaction to major-power rivalry. It also represents a diplomatic tool one that can foster enduring operational linkages with Indonesia. As defence infrastructure accrues symbolic and functional

significance, its availability to regional partners signals a shift from unilateral defence posturing to multilateral capacity building. This reorientation would benefit from a series of institutional arrangements: the establishment of a bilateral maritime coordination centre, the formalisation of mutual port access rights under peacetime and crisis conditions, and the development of joint standard operating procedures for exercises, patrols, and humanitarian operations.

Central to this agenda is the enhancement of joint training and doctrinal alignment. While Australia and Indonesia currently cooperate under multiple frameworks and regional multilateral exercises, the depth and frequency of such engagements remain insufficient given the scale of emerging challenges. Expanded training exchanges, embedded officer programs, and dual-domain simulations particularly in submarine operations, anti-submarine warfare, and amphibious logistics could bridge critical gaps in operational interoperability. The complexity of modern maritime threats, including cyber disruptions, maritime militias, and unmanned systems, further underscores

the need for multi-domain training that transcends traditional surface warfare.

Moreover, joint investments in maritime domain awareness (MDA) represent a low-cost, high-yield avenue for enhanced collaboration. Australia's technological advantages in over-the-horizon radar systems (such as JORN) and satellite surveillance could complement Indonesia's localised knowledge of archipelagic waters. The integration of both countries into a fused MDA network would improve real-time threat detection, deconflict overlapping patrols, and create a shared understanding of regional maritime patterns. In this regard, the Pacific Fusion Centre and other regional coordination mechanisms offer useful platforms for multilateral engagement.

This strategic convergence occurs against the backdrop of Australia's broader defence transformation. Defence spending continues to rise in real terms, with a pronounced emphasis on naval modernisation and power projection. This is evident in both conventional upgrades and the pursuit of nuclear-propelled submarines under AUKUS. The acquisition of Virginia-class submarines

and the development of the SSN-AUKUS class constitute a generational leap in undersea warfare capability, enabling long-range, survivable strike options that reinforce deterrence. However, this technical evolution must be matched by diplomatic sophistication and operational partnerships to avoid the perception of unilateral militarisation.

Importantly, Australia's naval investment is not expansionist in nature. It is a defensive adaptation to a security environment characterised by volatility and contested maritime norms. The pursuit of long-range strike assets, enhanced surveillance, and resilient basing in northern Australia should not be interpreted as zero-sum but rather as contributing to a regional balance of power that deters coercion. As one defence analyst noted, the AUKUS arrangement constitutes a "very costly, and thus credible, signal" of Australia's strategic resolve one that necessitates corresponding reassurance and cooperation with proximate partners such as Indonesia.

While Australia's maritime capabilities may remain modest in comparison to China or the United States,

its strategic intent and alliance network grant it disproportionate regional influence. To retain credibility and avoid strategic drift, Australia must ensure that its military modernisation is matched by constructive engagement. This includes managing sensitivities around sovereignty and non-alignment in Southeast Asia, particularly given Indonesia's traditional reluctance to be subsumed within great-power frameworks.

Ultimately, Australia's northern infrastructure anchored in Darwin offers a platform not only for domestic resilience but for shared security. The Port of Darwin and HMAS Coonawarra, situated at the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific, can function as operational and symbolic gateways for regional cooperation. By embracing interoperability with Indonesia through logistics sharing, doctrinal integration, and real-time coordination Australia can shape a more stable maritime order in its near region. In doing so, it would move from passive balancing

to active coalition-building, grounded in geographic realism, shared interests, and institutional maturity.

## BIOGRAPHY

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Nathan Streher is currently Dosen/lecturer at Seskoal after completion of DIKREG 62. He is a Mine Warfare Clearance Diving Officer and has served overseas in representational positions in both Malaysia and Indonesia. He holds a Master of Business (UNSW), a Master of Applied Maritime Operations (SESKOAL), A Graduate Certificate in Public Sector Management (QUT) and is currently studying a Master of Philosophy (UOW) with his research theme being "*The militarisation of Northern Australia and its impact on the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship*". He also has multiple works on defence strategy published by the Williams Foundation and the Australia Strategic Policy Institute.