

This is an excerpt from a paper detailing a proposed strategy for bring the RAN's Mine Countermeasures capability back up to an acceptable level. In part it discusses the anachronistic approach of having our MCM forces based in Sydney (at HMAS WATERHEN). Against the background of the growing influence of China in the region – this review is timely. There are now pressing requirements to relocate our Naval (and perhaps Air force – I will leave Army to someone better qualified) to the Northwest of Australia.

An excerpt from "The RAN's Mine Warfare Capabilty – At the Cross Roads"

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A new Naval Base in the North West ?

If our Government does proceed to investigate the basing of more US Naval capability in Australia, which although not inevitable, would seem to be both sensible and necessary, the focus should be the North West of the continent. Already senior politicians on both sides of Government are now openly discussing this issue. The future basing of a US Battle Group in Australia is a distinct possibility and in the event of such an outcome, Exmouth Gulf would be the logical place for establishing such a naval presence. It would provide adequate access to the strategic routes to Asia, and provide a relatively short transit to the continental shelf for submarines and surface ships¹. See Figure 1. Geographically, the north west of Australia is the logical place for the major components of the RAN fleet to also be based including submarines. The basic building blocks of sufficient infrastructure are already there and will increase with the dramatic investment in resource exploitation in the region. It would not be surprising to see this issue raised by Government in the 2013 Strategic Review or earlier. It would also be argued that in the event of such a move, the MCM fleet will also have to be located there. This makes far more sense than the present Sydney location. The major aim of the MCM force at Exmouth would be to insure safe passage to and from the edge of the continental shelf for LHDs, surface combatants, support ships and submarines (and the USBG if based there).

With cooperation from the USA the present joint approach to facilities could be expanded to provide a deep water access port for a large Naval Force. Neither Darwin nor Rockingham is suitable for a Battle Group sized force. Darwin is too shallow and plagued by difficult tides and currents and Rockingham is extremely vulnerable to mining. Exmouth Gulf however has all the attributes of a suitable large force port and would also have the added advantage of being close to extensive training areas for land, sea and air forces.

The US government were enthusiastic about the opportunities provided by Singapore in being able to host aircraft carrier sized surface units at the purpose built Changi Naval base, they will be even more appreciative of a Northwest Cape initiative as it provides many attractions missing from Singapore (the access to training areas is but one). The level of

¹ Against the background of enormous investment in mine technology by China coupled with a stated policy of using its conventional submarine fleet as mine layers – it is essential that the RAN and USN forces have relatively short passage to the relative safety of deep water. This requirement is not satisfied by either the basing arrangements at either HMAS STIRLING or Darwin.

infrastructure at Exmouth will continue to grow exponentially over the next few years. Defence should take advantage of this and start talking seriously about a Naval base rationalisation. The historic ties with Sydney need to be cast aside and action taken immediately to start building facilities at Exmouth with a view to having the Fleet relocated by 2020.

Figure 1 Exmouth Gulf and Distances to Asia

