

# Island-Consciousness and Australian Strategic Culture

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One of the most curious aspects of Australian national culture is the absence of a significant maritime tradition. This is a striking paradox in that, as an island-continent dependent on sea communications, trade and alliances, Australia should be the archetype of a liberal maritime nation. As the leading geographer, Saul B. Cohen put it in his 1964 study, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World*, Australia's geopolitical character is that

of a 'trade dependent maritime state' whose interests are tied to a larger off-shore Asian and Oceanic geo-strategic region. The reality of Australia's maritime environment is further underlined by the fact that its coastline is 35,877 kilometres in length while its northern approaches are ringed by 13,000 islands stretching for over 5,000 kilometres through the island archipelagos from the Cocos Islands through Java to Fiji.

## Australia's Continental Culture

Yet, despite these factors, a maritime character is not imprinted on the Australian psyche. Indeed, it is arguably the missing element in the country's sense of its history. As the Western Australian maritime historian, Frank Broeze, has lamented, Australians are a coastal people with a continental outlook, an island-nation with an inward focus. To a great extent, this paradox has its origins in the tension between

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Australia's geographical position in the Asia-Pacific and its historical heritage as an outpost of Anglo-Celtic civilisation. Geographical position suggests that security be sought by looking inwards to the vastness of a continental island. Heritage suggests that Australia look outward as an island-continent in a maritime embrace of cultural values.

For most of Australia's history, isolation and distance ensured that it was continental awareness not island-consciousness that dominated nearly all the major aspects of Australian culture. In politics, Australian Federation in 1901 was the culmination of a philosophy of continental union rather than of island unity. As Prime Minister Edmund Barton memorably put it, Federation established 'a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation'. Today, over a century later, a powerful 'continental regionalism' continues to dominate the outlook of many of the States, particularly Queensland and Western Australia.

Continental awareness also infuses Australian literature and art—from the poems of Henry Lawson, through the novels of Ion Idriess and Patrick White, to the paintings of the Heidelberg School and of Sidney Nolan. Lawson's poetry captures the levelling romantic egalitarianism of the bush, later upheld by Russel Ward in his *The Australian Legend*. Idriess's popular 1932 novel, *Flynn of the Inland*, tells the quintessential outback story of the establishment of the flying doctor service. By the early 1970s, the book had gone through no fewer than 24 editions. Patrick White's *Voss*, based on the career of the explorer Ludwig Leichardt, is a haunting story of doomed exploration into the volcanic silence of the dead inner landscape of Australia. Here, in the inland, writes White, with a piercing visual continentalism, 'the great empty mornings were terrible until the ball of the sun was tossed skyward'.

The paintings of the Heidelberg masters, such as Frederick McCubbin and Arthur Streeton, celebrate pastoral landscape, while Nolan's famous paint-

ings of Ned Kelly capture the interior world of the bushranger, not the seafarer. In the words of Ian Mudie, it is the outback, not the ocean that grips the minds of Australians 'like heart and blood, from heat to mist'. In 1976, when John Bach published his *A Maritime History of Australia*, he conceded that 'there has been [in Australia] a lack of what might be called a national maritime tradition'.

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#### Island-Consciousness and Strategic culture

Not surprisingly, continental awareness has been the major feature of Australia's strategic culture and its pervasiveness has long inhibited Australia's security and defence policies from expressing the nation's true geopolitical identity as a 'trade dependent maritime state'. Two of the pioneers of Australian strategic analysis, Frederick Eggleston and T.B. Millar have both lamented Australia's curious 'sea blindness'. In 1930, Eggleston noted, 'we do not have that sense of the sea and our surroundings which is generally developed in an island people'. In a similar vein, Millar, in his 1965 book, *Australia's Defence*, was moved to remind his readers that 'the first point to remember about the Australian island-continent is not that it is a continent but that it is an island'. Since island nations do not have to be invaded in order to

be militarily defeated, they invariably prepare to fight offshore wars in defence of their values and interests. For example, Britain has traditionally employed offshore maritime strategies involving a careful blend of mobile joint naval and military forces.

In sharp contrast, Australia's vast land mass has always suggested that the country is best viewed in strategic terms as a continental-island rather than an island-continent. For example, the World War II amphibious operations of the 7th and 9th Divisions of the 2nd AIF in the maritime South-West Pacific campaign have always been overshadowed in the national iconography by the 1st AIF's experience of World War I continental battles on the Western Front such as Bullecourt, Hamel and Amiens. In many respects, much of Australia's peacetime twentieth-century strategy and defence policy was based on a strategic interpretation of Barton's 'nation for a continent and a continent for a nation' formula.

As a result, many policies were based around continental geography serving as a bastion against invasion. As naval writers such as Alan Robertson and Lee Corder have argued, many Australian strategists view the sea not as a manoeuvre space that facilitates offshore deployment, but as a defensive moat that separates a continental landmass from the South-East Asian archipelagos. Such a strategic philosophy of the sea does not recall the democratic Anglo-American maritime tradition. Rather, it is in Robertson's words, 'a continentalist's idea of maritime strategy' and has more in common with the narrow navalist outlooks of Russia and China. It is an intellectual approach to the use of the sea that owes more to the work of Theodore Ropp on continental navies, such as France's *Jeune Ecole* school, than to the classical English school of maritime operations led by Sir Julian Corbett and Basil Liddell Hart. Colloquially, in terms of philosophical outlook, then, most Australian strategists have been dingoes rather than sharks.

In strategic terms, Australia's self-image as a continental island rather than an island-continent has given Australia peacetime strategic doctrines that seldom meet the realities of crisis and war. For example, in the twentieth century, continental awareness delivered Australia three great fortress defence policies: the Federation era strategy of continental naval defence between 1901 and 1914; the Singapore naval bastion strategy of the 1920s and 1930s; and finally the Defence of Australia 'sea-air gap' strategy of the 1980s and 1990s. Such approaches overlooked the truth that geography can only ever be the grammar, not the logic, of strategy. So it is that in every war and security crisis faced since Federation, including both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and East Timor *redux*, the geographical ideal has always been eclipsed by the political reality of offshore deployment in order to defend Australia's vital non-territorial interests and, above all, its Western liberal democratic values. Ultimately, in times of peril, Australia has always embraced its true geopolitical character as an 'off-shore' island-continent whose destiny is tied to the global fate of Western civilisation.

In strategic terms, Australia is a

country of deep paradoxes. It is a European cultural outpost in an Asian geography in which there have been few natural allies. It is an island-continent that sees itself as a continental island. It is a country that has a hinterland but no heartland, and yet it is the bush not the sea that has shaped the national character. Australians affirm Gallipoli, a quintessential maritime amphibious assault on the shores of Turkey, as their baptism of continental nationhood. In times of peace, Australia has often upheld static, geo-strategic doctrines of naval bastions and sea-air gaps only to find that, in times of war and crisis, such doctrines are incompatible with the fluid interests of Australia's geopolitics which dictate an overseas role for all of its military forces.

In an age of globalisation and strategic unpredictability, marked by the rise of asymmetric and networked enemies, transnational threats and failed states, Australia must abandon Barton's outmoded continentalist formula. The country can no longer afford to allow continental awareness and geographical determinism to create a paradox between its strategic theory and practice. In an era in which a regional 'sea of instability' can easily merge with a global Jihadist 'arc of terrorism', a multifaceted

security outlook is required—one that is simultaneously globally attuned, regionally focused and alliance-oriented.

In the early twenty-first century, Australia requires an outward-looking strategic philosophy that upholds values and interests over the inward-looking imperatives of continental geography. Cultivating such an outlook will need a greater appreciation of Australia as an island-continent and will involve developing a new synthesis of national ideas and security requirements—a synthesis that should embrace a deeper knowledge of contemporary currents of history, culture and geopolitics. In this endeavour we need to remember the great influence that democratic values play in shaping strategy. As Admiral Henry Eccles has written, 'the ultimate source of strategy lies in the values of the people of a nation. In a free society a strategy that is contrary to the sense of values of the people cannot be expected to succeed'. In Australia's case, its values are embedded in its democratic history, not in its silent geography, and this great teaching from the past must become our beacon to the future.

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