

Maritime Order in Asia: Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Event Report

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Institute for Security &
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MU Murdoch
University

Indo-Pacific
Research Centre

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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ABOUT IPRC

The Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC) engages with the significant challenges of our century and in our region: socio-economic development, human security, and geo-strategic governance. We advance understanding about the political, economic, sociocultural, and environmental issues in the Indo-Pacific region. The IPRC undertakes multi- and trans-disciplinary research in the region and supports Murdoch University's engagement with the region. Our location on the west coast of Australia enables the centre to provide distinctive insights into the changes and challenges in the Indian Ocean Rim. Demand for a contemporary understanding of the region and its challenges presents exciting opportunities for the IPRC to pursue research and engagement goals that enhance governmental, business, and civil society objectives in the region.

Maritime Order in Asia: Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Contextual Background

On March 31, 2026, the Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC) and the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) co-organised a special online discussion featuring Professor Bec Strating on the theme of 'Maritime Order in Asia: Australia and the Indo-Pacific'.

This report summarizes Professor Bec Strating's presentation, which explored Australia's maritime security agenda. The discussion examined how Australia's identity as an ocean-dependent state shapes its security outlook across the Indian, Pacific, and Southern Oceans. It further explored Australia's construction and promotion of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic maritime region in the era of shifting global power dynamics. In particular, the discussion focused on the context of intensifying the U.S.-China competition, uncertainty in traditional alliances, and the growing importance of middle powers' engagement.

Prof. Strating's presentation outlined Australia's longstanding commitment to supporting maritime order and international legal frameworks, such as UNCLOS. Lastly, she highlighted Australia's interests in its engagement with regional marine sub-areas, such as the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Southern Ocean, and in the Western Pacific, particularly the

East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, each of which presents distinct political and security dynamics.

Key Takeaway 1:

Australia's Identity as a Maritime Nation

Australia's security must be understood through its identity as a maritime nation. Australia is inherently shaped by its geography, being an Indo-Pacific country connected through the Indian, Pacific, and Southern Oceans, effectively making it a three-ocean state. It possesses one of the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zones, which is around 8 million square kilometers. Eighty-five percent of Australia's population lives in the coastal areas.

Australia also encompasses around 8,000 islands and maintains a search and rescue (SAR) zone covering approximately 53 million square kilometers, highlighting its extensive maritime responsibilities. As the fifth largest maritime trading nation in the world, 98 percent of its goods come by sea. With a blue economy valued at over \$80 billion, Australia's economic prosperity and national resilience are deeply tied to secure sea lines of communication and maritime choke points, which play a critical role in shaping both its national and economic security.

However, despite this vast maritime domain, Australia has often been described

Prof. Bec Strating



Bec Strating is the Director of the La Trobe Centre for Global Security and a Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University, Melbourne. She has extensive experience working in the academia-policy-public engagement nexus in the fields of international diplomacy and security. She is currently the Australian Member Committee Co-Chair of the Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific and serves as an Australian representative in the Expert and Eminent Persons Grouping in the ASEAN Regional Forum. She was Director of La Trobe Asia from 2020 to 2025.

Her research focuses primarily on Asian regional security, maritime disputes, and Australian foreign and defence policy. She is the author of 'Girt by Sea: reimagining Australia's Security' with Professor Joanne Wallis (La Trobe University Press/Black Inc, 2024), which was launched by Foreign Minister Penny Wong in April 2024. She is the co-editor of 'Blue Security in the Indo-Pacific' (Routledge, 2024) and 'The Politics of Global Ocean Regions' (Palgrave, 2025). This presentation is partly based on the co-authored book with Professor Joanne Wallis 'Girt by Sea'.

as "sea blind," reflecting a disconnect between its dependence on the ocean and its broader strategic awareness of it.

Key Takeaway 2: Australian 'Threat Perception'

Australia's maritime security is deeply shaped by the evolution of its perception of threat. Professor Strating explained this evolution through the lens of geography, history, and culture. As a maritime country located far from its traditional "great and powerful friends"—first the United Kingdom and later the United States—Australia's sense of security has long been influenced by its position in the Indo-Pacific and its ambivalent identity between Asia and the Pacific. This has generated questions about whether Australia belongs within Asia or remains outside it, shaped by historical narratives, including early anti-Asia sentiment and a persistent "fear of abandonment" by major allies.

The experience of World War II made a decisive shift toward deeper alignment with Washington. The ANZUS Treaty has since formed the cornerstone of Australia's defense posture, reinforcing dependence on the United States as a dominant maritime power.

However, since the late 20th century, there has been a gradual shift from seeking security "from Asia" to seeking security "in Asia." Since the 2000-s, with the increased US-China competition, the perception of 'threat' has changed significantly.

There are concerns about China's "grey zone" activities in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait, as well as naval expansion and operations near Australian waters. The growing competition in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait has increased the

risk of incidents that could escalate into larger conflicts. In addition to the “China threat” discourses, the state of the current Australia-US relations has led many to question the reliability of the United States as an ally and security guarantor.

Therefore, with the increased US-China competition threatening Australia’s security, Australia places strong emphasis on conflict prevention, while also navigating a dual strategic concern: the fear of abandonment by allies and the risk of entrapment in regional conflicts.

Key Takeaway 3: Australia’s Maritime Security

Australia’s threat perception is shaped not only by China’s rising assertiveness but also by concerns about the vulnerability of the maritime order and the legitimacy of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Maintaining a stable and predictable maritime order is central to Australia’s national security. This is because the maritime order encompasses not only defense considerations, but also a broader economic resilience, trade and supply chains, environmental sustainability, and public health. It also concerns human security challenges, including human rights at sea, such as trafficking and labour exploitation, as well as transnational crimes like drug and arms trafficking. In this sense, Australia’s vision on the maritime order is closely tied to its maritime security, with a strong focus on maintaining open sea lines of communication and secure trading routes.

Closely related to this, Australia places strong emphasis on maintaining the legitimacy of UNCLOS as the foundation of maritime order. It views UNCLOS as

the “constitution for the oceans,” which is essential to ensuring the peaceful settlement of disputes.

For over a decade, Australia has supported this framework as a means of safeguarding its maritime interests, including freedom of navigation, open sea lines of communication, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

However, this order is increasingly challenged by what Professor Strating described as great power ‘exceptionalism’, where major states either ignore or selectively apply international law. Particularly, if the United States dismisses international law, it becomes harder to prosecute this idea of a rules-based order. This also includes concerns about China asserting maritime claims based on domestic law rather than international law. In this context, according to Professor Strating, the rules-based order becomes even more important for middle powers, such as Australia.

Key Takeaway 4: Australia, the Indo-Pacific Concept, and the Rules-based Order

Australia is positioning itself as a strong supporter of the Indo-Pacific concept and maritime order. Australia was one of the first countries, following Japan, to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept in its 2013 Defence White Paper. This concept is crucial for Australian national and economic security, emphasizing the importance of sea lines of communication, maritime trade routes, and the movement of critical resources such as energy and fuel. The Indo-Pacific concept replaced an economic concept of Asia-Pacific with a maritime and strategic framing of the region.

This approach involves engaging with

partners such as India to help balance the rise of China, while also anchoring the United States in the region. It is driven by Australia's concerns about maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight, and ensuring the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law rather than through coercive or unilateral actions.

The "rules-based order" is a way of talking about China without explicitly talking about China. When Australia refers to the rules-based order, it is often signalling concerns about countries it views as not adhering to those rules.

Furthermore, there has been a rise in strategic maritime-focused initiatives in the region, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS. The Quad has a significant maritime cooperation dimension, while AUKUS, particularly through its nuclear-powered submarine component, represents a major investment in Australia's maritime security capacity that it would not otherwise possess, through the nuclear-powered submarines.

Through this, it can be seen how the Indo-Pacific has been adopted as a maritime strategic concept, largely driven by Australia's threat perceptions and concerns about regional security challenges. Professor Strating described Australia through a status quo state, seeking to maintain an existing order grounded in international law, particularly the law of the sea, and historically supported by US power.

Key Takeaway 5:
Australia's Interests in the South China Sea and Four Marine Sub-regions

Australia's interests are shaped by the unique strategic environments of its various

maritime sub-regions, each requiring specific policy focus.

Professor Bec Strating emphasized Australia's interests in the South China Sea, primarily connecting them with Australia's concerns about whether UNCLOS continues to provide a legitimate basis for regional order. While the South China Sea is important for Australia's trade passes, the primary importance is how the regional order is being challenged in ways that sit uncomfortably with Australia's interests.

She also discussed the roles of other maritime sub-regions in the context of Australia's interests. The South Pacific has long been seen as Australia's immediate neighbourhood, although attention to it has tended to fluctuate over time. More recently, the growing influence of China has brought renewed focus to the region, which has its own distinct political dynamics, institutions, and regional norms. Then there are Australia's northern maritime approaches, which are important for dealing with non-traditional security challenges like illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, which increased during the pandemic and has remained relatively high.

Australia is also becoming more focused on the Indian Ocean, where Australia has its longest coastline but hasn't traditionally thought of itself as an Indian Ocean country. That's starting to shift, with greater recognition of its importance for maritime security.

In the Western Pacific, particularly the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, there is a continuing concern about the risk of escalation and the possibility of conflict involving major powers, which remains central to Australia's fear of entanglement. And finally, there's the Southern Ocean, which is often overlooked in Indo-Pacific

discussions but is becoming increasingly important, especially in terms of defense planning and concerns about future competition in Antarctica and a broader Southern Ocean. Under frameworks like the Antarctic Treaty System, Australia has historically played a leadership role, particularly in relation to environmental protection and in supporting the principle of Antarctica as a non-militarised zone. Whether it will remain a non-militarised zone, however, remains to be seen.

The key point is that there is no single, uniform maritime environment. Instead, Australia is navigating a set of diverse and complex sub-regions, each of which shapes its broader approach to maritime security and regional order.

Conclusion

The ISDP–IPRC discussion with Professor Bec Strating provided a comprehensive overview of how Australia conceptualizes its maritime security and its place within the evolving Indo-Pacific order. A central theme is that Australia’s understanding of maritime order is closely anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which it views as the foundation for stable, predictable, and rules-based governance of the oceans. From this perspective, Canberra has increasingly interpreted China’s actions in the South and Western Pacific as challenges to an UNCLOS-centred maritime order, particularly in relation to contested maritime spaces and broader questions of regional stability.


At the same time, these developments are framed as part of a wider regional order problem, given that Australia’s strategic environment is fundamentally maritime in nature and embedded within the Indo-

Pacific. However, the presentation also highlighted that pressure on the rules-based order is not limited to China alone, with growing uncertainty surrounding aspects of United States policy also prompting Australia to reflect more deeply on the role of middle powers in sustaining regional stability and legal norms.

As an island-continent economy, Australia’s prosperity and resilience remain heavily dependent on the openness of sea lines of communication and secure maritime trade routes. In strategic terms, initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS reflect how Australia’s threat perceptions, particularly in relation to China’s naval and maritime activities, are translated into broader regional alignments and into the construction of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic framework.

At the same time, the discussion underscored that Australia does not apply a uniform understanding of threat across the Indo-Pacific, but instead interprets risks and security challenges differently across distinct maritime sub-regions, each shaped by its own political dynamics and strategic significance.

Disclaimer: This report is solely based on the presentation and does not represent the views of either IPRC or ISDP.



Institute for Security and Development Policy
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Nacka, Sweden
www.isdp.eu | info@isdp.eu