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Australian Strategic Policy Institute  
Canberra, Australia  
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31 March 2015  
*As delivered***

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. How about that cricket match two days ago! And happy birthday of the Royal Australian Air Force, which turns 94 years young today.

Folks, it's a great pleasure for me to be back in Australia and back in Canberra. I have to tell you that I was excited to speak at ASPI last year, but I'm doubly so to be invited back this year. This rarely happens, so I attribute this to either desperation or curiosity, or both. At any rate, I'm glad to be here.

This is my fourth trip to Australia as the U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander. I've visited no other country more in my 15 months on the job. It's wonderful to be here in this magnificent Australian War Memorial, a truly fitting place to acknowledge the deep friendship and powerful alliance between Australia and the United States.

And it's also a fitting place to underscore this year's 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli Campaign and the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, whose sacrifices are forever remembered here. We can't say thank you enough.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm happy to see a big crowd here tonight, and I'm told the event organizers didn't expect this many people.

Turns out that Winston Churchill once addressed a large crowd in the United States and a member of the audience cornered him and by way of a compliment said, "Doesn't it thrill you Mr. Churchill to know that every time you make a speech the hall is packed to overflowing?"

"It is quite flattering," Churchill replied. "But whenever I feel this way I always remember if instead of giving a speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."

Well I'm flattered by the size of the audience here tonight and I hope it wasn't originally half this big. But whatever your motivations, thank you all for being here.

This evening I've been asked to talk about cooperative maritime operations in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region – an important topic, a relevant topic, and without some forethought, a lengthy topic.

Former U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey was known for his lengthy speeches and his wife Muriel once told him, "Hubert, for a speech to be immortal, it doesn't have to be eternal."

So with that in mind, I intend to keep my remarks to the left of eternal, no matter how long it takes.

The Australian-U.S. alliance is a celebrated one. Our two nations have worked, fought, bled and died together. We fought in World Wars I and II. We fought communism in the hot wars of Korea and Vietnam, and the Cold War throughout the latter half of the last century. We fought together in the Gulf War. And for the last decade we've fought side-by-side in the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Peter (Jennings) was right when he opened the conference this morning and said that Australia's allies and friends need Australia to play a large role in global security affairs. But I would go a step further and say that Australia needs Australia to play a leading role in global security, and indeed you have.

Our coalition fight against ISIL is a perfect example. As Foreign Minister Bishop recently said, ISIL is an organization that "seeks to drag the world back to the Dark Ages." ISIL threatens all law-abiding freedom-loving nations, including Australia. So I applaud Australia's leadership in this fight.

Defense Minister Andrews commented this morning, and I quote, "Australia is a maritime nation and we require maritime security." Unquote. He could have said the same thing about the U.S. Both of our countries have served together on the high seas, in operations and exercises around the world, for the last century. We sail together as part of multi-national coalitions. Just this week, HMAS Success joined NATO's counter-piracy Operation Ocean Shield to work with partner nations in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. And I applaud Australia's 29th deployment with Combined Task Force 150 to help maintain maritime security in the Horn of Africa region.

We're a highly successful team at sea because we practice at it and train for it in exercises like Pacific Partnership, RIMPAC, and Lung Fish. We will conduct Talisman Sabre in just a few months. This is a high-end warfighting exercise designed to increase combat readiness and our ability to work with each other.

Talisman Sabre is a big deal for the Pacific Fleet. We will have an amphibious ready group and a carrier strike group down here. The Royal Australian Navy and the U.S. Navy have robust exchange programs where our officers and enlisted personnel serve in each other's units. It might surprise you to know that we have 31 U.S. Navy Sailors living, working and studying in Australia today. Wherever and whenever the U.S. Navy and the Royal Australian Navy sail together, enhanced security and stability follow.

The link between our two great democracies is as important to our future as it has been to our storied past. And that's why I remain committed to my part in deepening our defense relationship with Australia.

As we look into the future, everyone recognizes the tremendous potential for economic growth here in this region. The Indo-Asia-Pacific will drive the global economy for at least the rest of this century – an area that just so happens to have the largest maritime crossroads of international trade in the world.

Oceans are the lifeblood of an interconnected global community. For centuries, the oceans kept us apart, but in this globalized world, they are the pathways that bring us together.

Obviously, security and stability in the maritime domain are critically important to economic prosperity, not just to us in America, not just to you here in Australia, but to all nations.

But there's also tremendous potential for disruption of economic prosperity in this volatile region. Mother Nature's got a mean streak in her that we have to prepare for. Just consider what's happened over the past few weeks in Vanuatu. First a 6.5 earthquake strikes, followed by a volcano erupting for the first time in a century, then Vanuatu's quarter-million people were socked by Cyclone Pam.

I strongly commend Australia, New Zealand, France, the U.K. and all those nations who reached out with speedy compassion and capability to aid the people of Vanuatu.

Disruption comes in many forms. Consider tragedies like the losses of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 and Air Asia Flight 8501 last year, which serve to demonstrate the importance of international cooperation in unexpected circumstances.

And we must deal with terrorists, criminals and other nefarious actors vying for financial or political gain. We contend with complex issues like terrorism, cyber-crime, piracy, trafficking in all its bad forms, trans-national criminal activity, even the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Then there are volatile threats like North Korea, which just rejected calls to apologize for the deadly sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette Cheonan, which occurred five years ago last week. Forty-six sailors died in that attack, a powerful reminder that North Korea remains both a dangerous and an unrepentant nation. It seeks nuclear weapons and a missile system that can deliver them throughout the region. That, folks, keeps me up at night.

We also see the misuse of maritime claims by some coastal states. The excessive nature of some of these claims is creating uncertainty and instability. These disruptions should compel us to increase cooperative efforts in this region, like those announced earlier this month, right here in Canberra, between Australia and Vietnam. Prime Minister Abbott said both nations, and I quote, "support freedom of navigation by air and by sea in the South China Sea. We both deplore any unilateral change to the status quo. We both think that disputes should be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law." Unquote.

Competing claims by several nations in the South China Sea increase the potential for miscalculation. But what's really drawing a lot of concern in the here and now is the unprecedented land reclamation currently being conducted by China.

China is building artificial land by pumping sand on to live coral reefs – some of them submerged – and paving over them with concrete. China has now created over four square kilometers of artificial landmass, roughly the size of Canberra's Black Mountain Nature Reserve.

The Indo-Asia-Pacific region is known for its mosaic of stunningly beautiful natural islands, from the Maldives to the Andamans, from Indonesia and Malaysia to the Great Barrier Reef and Tahiti. And I get to live in the beautiful Hawaiian Islands, in one of nature's great creations, a magnificent geography formed by millions of years of volcanic activity.

In sharp contrast, China is creating a great wall of sand, with dredges and bulldozers, over the course of months. When one looks at China's pattern of provocative actions towards smaller claimant states – the lack of clarity on its sweeping nine-dash line claim that is inconsistent with international law and the deep asymmetry between China's capabilities and those of its smaller neighbors – well it's no surprise that the scope and pace of building man-made islands raise serious questions about Chinese intentions.

The United States and other countries continue to urge all claimants to conform to the 2002 China-ASEAN "Declaration of Conduct," where the parties committed to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability." How China proceeds will be a key indicator of whether the region is heading towards confrontation or cooperation.

Like Australia, the U.S. has important ties to China. Secretary of State John Kerry recently said, "One thing that I know will contribute to maintaining regional peace and stability is a constructive relationship between the United States and China." We share economic and cultural ties and, with millions of Americans of Chinese heritage in our nation, we share family ties. And we're all hopeful that China will become a contributor to stability, not a source of insecurity. But as we like to say in Navy circles, hope is not a strategy.

So we also continue to constructively engage China, exploring new confidence building measures while encouraging China to play a responsible role in supporting international rules and norms in the maritime domain.

Author Robert Kaplan often talks about the maritime domain. In his recent book "Asia's Cauldron," he writes, "Europe is a landscape and East Asia is a seascape. Therein lies a crucial difference between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Because of the way that geography illuminates and sets priorities, the physical contours of East Asia argue for a naval century."

And it certainly looks to me like it's shaping up that way. American leaders also recognize it's going to be an Indo-Asia-Pacific century. That's why we're conducting a whole-of-government rebalance to this region, to include diplomatic, economic and security spheres.

From a perspective of global prosperity, arguably the most critical of these spheres is the economic one, and we've got a lot of interagency civilian partners working that vital piece.

But the most visible sphere is the military one. Our military is playing an important role in the rebalance, and I can assure you, our naval forces have a big piece to play in this.

Consider our Marines, some returning for a fourth rotation to Darwin. Lucky them! Now, after more than a decade of fighting land wars, our Marine Corps is returning to its roots and deploying from Navy ships, surging from the sea if you will.

We call this “amphibiosity,” a funny word I first thought was the scientific name for your Duckbilled Platypus. Well, amphibiosity’s a new word for an old skill, one familiar to both of our nations. Today, Australia is a leader in this specialized type of warfare, and with your new Canberra-class amphibious assault ships, I know you’ll continue to lead far into the foreseeable future.

As part of our rebalance, we’re bringing our new stuff to the Indo-Asia-Pacific to work with your new stuff; like the amphibious assault ship USS America, built to deploy Marines equipped with MV-22 Ospreys; the new Joint Strike Fighters; and helicopters, wherever and whenever they’re needed. Not to mention MH-60 helicopters, Super Hornets, Growlers, Triton UAV, and the mighty P-3’s replacement, the P-8 Poseidon.

Consider the powerful synergy of HMAS Canberra and USS America working together in an amphibious operation somewhere.

Let me dispel any doubts. Our commitment to the rebalance remains steadfast. We are on pace to have 60 percent of our Navy based in the Pacific Fleet by 2020. By maintaining a capable and credible forward presence in the region, we’re able to improve our ability to maintain stability and security. And if any crisis does break out, we’re better positioned to quickly respond.

But I’m also a realist. I’m responsible for U.S. Navy activities from Hollywood to Bollywood, from polar bears to penguins. I know full well that the security effort of this large and important region is a shared challenge that demands shared solutions. We’re stronger together.

Now the topic of this conference isn’t lost on me, where you’re considering Australia’s future surface fleet. This is an important issue for all who value having a strong and advanced Australian maritime presence to protect your national interests.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates a nation’s intent more vividly than a highly capable surface fleet. Way back in 1908, at the invitation of your Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, the U.S. Navy's Great White Fleet visited Australia as it circumnavigated the world. It was the first visit of a non-Royal Navy fleet to Australian waters.

Your leaders immediately recognized the value of such a fleet in protecting your shores and sea lanes. And they recognized the value of projecting power abroad to advance your national interests. Shortly after that visit, Australia ordered its first modern warships, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In this naval century, any coastal nation without credible and capable maritime forces will be at a disadvantage. So I applaud your efforts to bring the new Hobart-class air warfare destroyers into the fleet. With their AEGIS systems, the Hobarts will further increase interoperability between our two navies, enabling even closer collaboration than ever before. In fact, I'll be flying to Adelaide tomorrow to visit the shipyard there to see these beauties firsthand.

But beyond the new Canberra and Hobart Class ships – and even the Sea-5000 project which is the subject of this conference – plans for the Royal Australian Navy of the latter half of the 21st century must be conceived soon. These are strategic decisions that only you can make; choices that will have ripple effects in the coming decades; choices that will define your nation's place in the middle and latter half of this naval century.

Australia and the United States must continue to invest in our nation's capabilities to sustain our technological edge. And we must work assiduously to ensure we can operate together, whether the mission is AAW, ASW or BMD. Like the great 21st century warrior-philosopher Lt. Cmdr. Mike Felber, my aide, says, "We must invest to evolve. We must innovate to survive."

Well folks, in order for me to survive, I need to wrap up this speech. I recall a story about a public speaker in the 1800s who unexpectedly died. There wasn't much money to cover the funeral expenses, so his friends decided to collect the few dollars necessary to give him a decent burial.

They didn't meet with much success until they called on a man who showed quite a bit of interest when the phrase 'public speaker' was mentioned.

"How much do you say you wanted?" he asked.

"Five dollars" they replied.

"Well..." he said, "Here's twenty-five. Go bury five of 'em."

Well, I hope my remarks haven't inspired those same sentiments in any of you. But just in case you're reaching for your wallets, let me quickly conclude with the following thought.

We live in an interconnected world of shared spaces, where we share the oceans, the air, outer space, and now, cyberspace. These spaces enable the free flow of goods, services, thoughts and ideas. They are the connective tissue that holds together the global economy and more importantly, a civil society.

Access to these thoroughfares is at risk due to increasing competition, and unfortunately, the provocative behaviors by some international actors. Each nation in this region has plenty at stake in this naval century and through cooperative maritime operations our combined efforts can help maintain the security needed for continued prosperity and peace.

That's why the United States, Australia, and all our allies, partners and friends in this region remain committed to fostering a rules-based system that respects international law and adherence to international norms. As we sail into the future together, we must remain committed to ensuring unfettered access to shared spaces.

There are three great ships that sail the high seas – friendship, partnership and leadership. And forums like this are the rudders that steer those ships towards cooperation and a more prosperous future.

Folks, thanks for your attention and your kindness tonight.

Thank you.