

AUSTRALIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC CENTURY

In an exclusive interview, **Kim Beazley**, Australia's ambassador to the United States, spoke to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe**, a defence writer and Visiting Fellow at the National Security Institute in Canberra, about the rise of the Indo-Pacific Region and Australia's role in it. Beazley is one of Australia's leading authorities on Indo-Pacific geopolitics and was the principal architect of the Royal Australian Navy's 'Two Ocean Navy' concept in the 1980s.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How significant is the Indo-Pacific region to Australia's national interests?

Kim Beazley: The Indo-Pacific region brings together the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific, two regions that are increasingly interconnected economically and geopolitically. The need to secure maritime sea routes and access energy reserves to supply the rapidly growing economies of China, India and other Asia-Pacific countries has made it the most strategically contested area in the world.

The Indo-Pacific region is a critical part of the global commons—with the United States, India and the China all active there. The United States is fundamentally a maritime power: As it restructures its defence forces, it will refocus on maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, India has been pursuing a 'Look East' policy since 1991 and increasingly views the Indian Ocean zone as some sort of regional system in itself.

The point is how to ensure a conversation that keeps the peace.

The advent of piracy off the Horn of Africa and Western military intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia has heightened the focus on the Indian Ocean Region. The enhanced presence of China and the rise of India as an emerging regional economic and military power are the two most important factors in revitalising the Indian Ocean's profile.

India is now becoming a much more prominent player in the region and harbours ambitions to become the dominant power in the Indian Ocean. For more than 20 years now, India has been talking about a Look East policy, but only in recent times has it put flesh to the bones.

With its Look East policy, India will increasingly focus on its maritime capability. So far, the Indian military has primarily focused on its land borders with Pakistan to its west and China to its north, but India is now substantially improving its maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

From the US point of view this is a good thing. The discussion between India and the United States is substantially bilateral rather than regional. They have been conducting joint military exercises for many years. There is probably more intense dialogue between India and the United States now than there has been at any point in independent India's history.

Washington has always been somewhat fascinated with India and respects it as a great democracy. The idea of democracy has always been important to the United States: it is its *leitmotif*.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: In the context of the rise of China and India, and the US realignment to the Asia-Pacific region: how important is the Five Power Defence Arrangement, or FPDA, in sustaining Australia's influence in Southeast Asia?

Kim Beazley: The FPDA is an important alliance involving Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. It is a statement of Australia's faith and commitment to the Asia-Pacific region, but it is not our only commitment. It is important for Australia to assure the Singaporeans and the Malaysians of our continued interest in them.

Back in the 1980s, when I was defence minister, I remember former Prime Minister Bob Hawke telling me to ensure that our Malaysian and Singaporean partners saw the relationship as continuing to develop. As far as I can see, there has been no abatement in that process in the last 30 years.

About the role that India plays in the region, Southeast Asian countries—be it Vietnam, Indonesia or Malaysia—all are observing the waters in which the Indians are increasingly active. This has become a factor in conversations on security related matters.

As they rise to prosperity, all Southeast Asian countries will shift the focus of their defence planning from internal security issues to operating in their maritime environment. The dialogue in Asian regional forums and direct bilateral conversations under the FPDA will therefore be important in managing security issues.

Of course engagement with Southeast Asia is not all about the FPDA. In the last two decades, Australia has developed a comprehensive engagement with its most powerful neighbour, Indonesia.

If there was ever a country that found itself in a crucial geographic position at different times in history, it is Indonesia. It is the hinge of the door that swings between the Pacific and Indian oceans. Indonesia is as conscious of the notion of an Indian Ocean region as anyone else. Australia-Indonesia engagement has developmental, security and economic dimensions. We are partners with multiple counter-terrorism agreements. Indonesia is our largest recipient of economic aid and has our largest embassy.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Historically speaking, how has the Indian Ocean featured in Australian defence and foreign policy thinking?

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Kim Beazley: Australia has always considered the Indian Ocean a critical region. When I was an academic back in the 1970s, I wrote books and contributed chapters to books on the Indian Ocean: I am glad everybody's caught up.

Australia has been strategically conscious of the Indian Ocean since Federation. The region has always played a substantial role in our thinking. Our experience in World War II took our focus off the region slightly because communication across the Pacific became more critical for our defence than communication across the Indian Ocean.

Australia has had a substantial maritime history, and our interest in the Indian Ocean preceded our interest in the Pacific. Until the past 30 to 40 years, the Indian Ocean was the critical highway of communication for the imperial defence system. But the Indian Ocean has reasserted itself quickly in the aftermath of World War II and altered its character completely since the collapse of the British Empire.

To a greater or lesser extent, the geography of the Indian Ocean region has always concerned Australia. Since the 1970s, Western Australia has exercised a substantial influence on Australian foreign policy. Western Australia won a major concession in Australian strategic thinking when back in the 1980s, Australia implemented the 'Two Ocean Navy' concept. Now in its thirty-

fifth year, the concept emphasised the need to develop our naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean in tandem with our naval presence in the Pacific Ocean. Although there have been many competing pressures, Western Australia has successfully sold an important perspective to the rest of the country.

During the first Gulf War, the Royal Australian Air Force, or RAAF, was operating F-18s from Diego Garcia at one point. Apart from that very brief period, Diego Garcia has been seen by Australia as essentially an Anglo-American interest, with which we have been only marginally engaged.

Australia also brings a better developed, or a more conscious, Indian Ocean regional entity approach to the table of international political discussions. That is a useful attribute of Australian diplomacy in this era.

Australia has historically focused more on the Cocos Islands than its other Indian Ocean territories. RAAF P-3s have used the islands in the past, although the facilities will need to be upgraded if the islands are to be used by new surveillance aircraft. The potential use of the Cocos Islands has been raised at low levels between Australia and the United States, but it is not on the table at senior levels.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Given the increased importance of the Indian Ocean Region today, is there a role for Australia to position itself as an important player in the region's geopolitics?

Kim Beazley: Australia's expanding focus on its western frontier has increasingly featured in defence and foreign policy formulation. In recent times, Australia has emphasised a 'Look

West' policy and a force posture review, both of which have recognised the Indian Ocean Region's renewed importance.

Australia can play an influential role in the Indian Ocean by discussing regional cooperation. It is true that we probably focus more on the Indian Ocean as a regional zone than most other countries along the Indian Ocean littoral. We tend to think in regional oceanic terms, which is part of Australia's geo-political perspective, while many other countries do not have that type of focus.

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I am not sure whether the Indian Ocean will develop significant regionalism like Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, but thinking in that way is a ticket for starting conversations with countries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Does that mean people in Africa, in the littoral of the Persian Gulf, or in South Asia automatically think in those regional terms? Probably not. But regardless of whether they are conscious of it, the maritime component at least leads them to think in regional terms.

Sea lines of communication almost invariably lead to a regional consciousness. When one contemplates that about 50% of the world's seaborne trade crosses the Indian Ocean at some point, and goes through the Southeast Asian archipelago, it is indisputable that the region exists as a practical, strategic reality that has to be addressed, regardless of whether it truly exists in a nation's consciousness.

Even if nothing substantial emerges, it is useful to talk in those sorts of terms. It is a topic that enhances the legitimacy of a conversation with Australia.