

THE NAVY

V88
No2
APR-JUN
2026

THE JOURNAL OF THE NAVY LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA



AUKUS: PULLING WOOL OVER WHOSE' EYES?

SEIZING SAMOA

**NAVIGATING BEYOND THE GAPS
– THERE BE DRAGONS**

**BUILDING A NAVY FOR
THE 2030s AND BEYOND**



125 YEARS
ANNIVERSARY

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY • THE NAVY LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA

\$9.45
INC.
GST

ISSN 1322-6231



9 771322 623000

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Front cover:

Artist's impression of the AUKUS submarine. (Image BAE Systems)

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Deadline for next edition 5 June 2026



THERE BE DRAGONS?

This edition begins as momentous events are occurring across the globe. From Venezuela, to the Middle East, to the Indian Ocean events are getting ahead of the narrative and long-standing strategies are being left in tatters. The neglect of our own Defence Forces and Navy – for long championed in terms of expenditure by politicians of all colours – is now coming home to roost. We are ill-prepared for tomorrow – evening is fast setting and the lights are going out...

The four papers reflect in part, or whole, the current pessimism and lack of confidence in institutions. The first paper, *Navigating the Gaps – there be Dragons* was, kindly provided in a reduced (and marinised) version by Air Marshal Edward Stringer CB CBE RAF (Rtd) – taken from his seminal paper: *The Say-Do Gaps in [UK] Defence – The dangers in carrying a small stick while taking loudly* (Policy Exchange research note, Jan 2026). Edward argues that:

December's US National Security Strategy (NSS) is starker yet. The post war consensus of America leading the West as the Global Policeman is over, "America First" was back, and Europe was singled-out in detail, more so than Russia and China, as a needy problem child that could no longer be a dependant of the US. It would have to defend itself.

The report was written before the Iran War and is, as a result, even more pressing. Britain has been left seemingly totally exposed in terms of Defence and Leadership. Even if it had the capability, it seemingly does not have the will. Stringer concludes:

Deterrence depends on credibility

If we are seen to be talking in a belligerent way about war but not preparing for it then we are inverting the famous Roosevelt advice to "speak softly but carry a big stick." We risk deleteriously raising tensions with our adversaries through our rhetoric without deploying the necessary capability to beneficially alter their calculations. This is inimical to good deterrence practice.

Given the appointments accomplished and the rank received, Air Marshal Stringer must have upset someone in the class conscious British Establishment, to have received a CB – welcome as it might be – rather than a knighthood. I would say we (and the UK) are all the better for it!

The second paper (2nd prize professional entry) is by long standing contributor Kelvin Curnow entitled *Building a Navy for 2030 and Beyond*. Kelvin argues:

With the new strategic denial focus, the commitment to build AUKUS nuclear attack submarines (AUKUS-SSNs), together with the *Hunter-class* and *Mogami-class* frigates ensure a high probability that the naval assets required for this strategy will be available in realistic timeframes. However, as positive as these commitments are there is a capability gap in future commitments which has not been addressed, that of organic air power. Moreover, there are factors which lie beyond Australia's control which could potentially disrupt these plans leading to a different focus in stratagem or to a modified acquisition plan.

Complementing Stringer's observations, but for Australia Curnow (Writing in August 2025) concludes:

The current government is availed of the reality that it must build a strong navy to protect Australia, secure our SLOCs and meet the obligations we have to our allies. It has set out on an ambitious ship building programme which will see the RAN double in size by 2040 and hold a range of capabilities never before possessed. This will come a considerable cost which will be to a large extent offset by the fact that the expenditure will remain in Australia, it will see the build-up domestic manufacturing capability, and also a considerable

growth in skilled professions. Australia is also moving forward with the aim to build much of the weaponry domestically, with the GMLRS and NSM to be produced by the GWEO Enterprise the initial examples of this policy being implemented. However:

leaving [AUKUS and US commitments aside] this concern aside the prospect of Australia possessing a large, well-equipped navy moving forward into the fifth decade of this century appears decidedly positive.

A week is a long time in politics and some of the confidence Kelvin Curnow and many others had in the halcyon days of winter 2025 have been exposed by the brutal reality of defence cuts, explored in more detail in *Directed Telescope*.

Simon Reay Atkinson another longstanding contributor (and NLA Vice President) also contributes this issue with his paper: *AUKUS: Pulling the Wool of Whose Eyes?* To an extent this paper parallels and builds on some of the warnings raised by Edward Stringer regarding the potential disconnect and divergence between U.S. and Australian Foreign and Domestic policies, placing strains on the "Alliance." Reay Atkinson also introduces (Builds on?) the U.S. First policies explained by Stringer – but adding (as seen in Venezuela and Iran) "Go alone if Necessary": USF/GAIN. The paper takes as its basis:

the U.S. Congress Research Service Report (CRS), *Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine (Pillar 1) Project: Background and Issues for Congress*, January 2026, produced after the "successful" AUSMIN (AUKUS) meeting in Washington, December 2025. The meeting was an outward success – potentially masking critical issues identified in the CRS Report. His paper examines the report with respect to what was not said, strategy, and Australia's commitment to AUKUS.

Simon notes that:

...recent developments in 2025 and early 2026 indicate that, while the Government maintains core U.S.-Australia security Alliance postures, it has increasingly diverged from U.S. positions on Middle East policy and certain multilateral initiatives (energy, Israel-Gaza, Iran, and climate change). In mid-2025, Australia shifted its stance on UN resolutions regarding Palestinian statehood, voting against the U.S., a move that separates Australia from the traditional U.S.-led 'negotiations first' approach.

Before the outbreak of the Iran War, Dr Atkinson wrote:

The Government's apparent prioritisation of gender equality in senior appointments, DIE, climate change action, green energy, multicultural inclusion, guns, hate speech laws, while maintaining social safety nets, high welfare spending, defence cuts and high tax and spend policies, might place the Government at odds with Trumpian, USF/GAIN strategy. An administration that, under JD Vance, may be in power for another 10 years.



The USN received its 26th Virginia-class submarine USS IDAHO (SSN799) December 25. (Imade GD Electric Boat)



A Collin-class submarine at the IFR 125 silhouetted against the Sydney CBD. (Image Aeneas)

The final paper (2nd prize non-professional entry) is by another longstanding contributor from across the ditch, Murray Dear. Writing on *Seizing Samoa* (“only a World War I footnote”) he notes “the capture of German Samoa on August 30, 1914 is of historical significance as it was the first time that a New Zealand expeditionary force, escorted by Australian, French, British and New Zealand warships, sailed to capture enemy territory”. Rightly, Curnow also observes:

It is not inconceivable that in the not too distant future the RAN and RNZN may need to dispatch a task group to liberate a small Pacific Island nation that has come under the oppressive influence of a large unfriendly state.

While in many ways an historical piece, Murray also identifies “that a smaller naval force could have been dispatched to seize Nauru and its strategically important phosphate deposits”. Regretfully [this] would not have been politically acceptable to an Australian government intent on seizing New Guinea at the earliest possible instance. As a result, an opportunity was lost for a possible naval victory off Samoa”. He concludes:

There are some lessons that can be learnt from the seizure of Samoa that remain relevant today:

When crises loom there is a clear need for an ANZAC policy group that can prioritise competing national strategic objectives.

It is not inconceivable that in the not too distant future the RAN/RNZN may need to dispatch a task group to liberate a small Pacific Island nation that has come under the oppressive influence of a large unfriendly state. It is also quite possible that this large unfriendly state may send a naval force southward to protect its interests in the South Pacific. Trans-Tasman co-operation to counter such a threat would be essential.

While history may not repeat, it can rhyme.

NEW LOOKS; OLD RETURNS

The President was keen to see the revamping of *Flash Traffic*. With a bit of “screwdriver long-redding,” it is hoped that this version of *Flash Traffic*—understood to be read and appreciated at the highest levels of Navy—returns to requisite levels of currency.

Articulated at the November Federal Council meeting was the wish to see the return of *Red Duster* – previously contributed to by some of our *Master Mariner* colleagues, now sadly crossed the bar. This edition, building on *Flash Traffic*, and critiquing NLA policies, alongside the considerations of the MUA and Baird Maritime (of Dr Neil Baird, a longstanding NSW NLA DIV Member), provides pithy commentary. There is a surprising amount in common—bi-partisan even—but also a lot to desire in terms of delivery and execution. We have, as the Iran War shown us, run out of preparation time.

Directed Telescope has also won plaudits from several commentators and builds this issue on *Flash Traffic* by absorbing *Greenwich Station* – the long running commentary on the tragic state of the RN. Given this is less to do with *Flash Traffic*, it seemed sensible to include in *Directed Telescope* – along with pieces on Defence cuts, recruitment, and Baselining. Noting Navy can no longer afford to paint its ships. The Navy’s 125th International Fleet Review covered in this issue is worth a look as is the Book Review, with books written by two remarkable female RAN supporters – one a retired WRAN.

AI

It is not often Ed gets to comment on AI – but he noted Simon Reay Atkinson’s comment “searches aided by AI.” This can raise questions as to progeny and claims of authorship. Some universities and institutions in the U.S. view any contribution by AI as making the paper “open source”. There are other concerns regarding plagiarism and the fact that AI perturbrates (around “answers”) and even hallucinates. *THE NAVY* seeks the authentic human author – perhaps aided by AI – Ed will look closely in future. There is potentially a difference between pre and post ChatGPT authorship? ■



For the maintenance of the Maritime wellbeing of the nation. The Navy League is intent upon keeping before the Australian people the fact that we are a maritime nation and that a strong Navy and capable maritime industry are elements of our national wellbeing and vital to the freedom of Australia. The League seeks to promote Defence self-reliance by actively supporting defence manufacturing, research, cyberspace, shipping, transport, and other relevant industries.

Through geographical necessity Australia's prosperity, strength, and safety depend to a great extent upon the security of the surrounding seas and island areas, and on unrestricted seaborne trade.

The strategic background to Australia's security is changing and, in many respects, has become much less certain following increasing tensions, particularly in East Asia involving major powers, and in Europe and the Middle East. The League believes that Australia should rapidly increase the capability to defend itself, paying particular attention to maritime defence.

The Navy League:

- Believes Australia can be defended against attack and that the prime requirement of our defence is an evident ability to control the sea and air space around us and to contribute to defending essential lines of sea, undersea and air communication with our Allies and trading partners.
- Supports a continuing strong alliance with Five Eyes, AUKUS and QUAD partners.
- Supports close relationships with all nations in our general area particularly PNG, Indonesia, the Philippines and the South Pacific Island States.
- Advocates the acquisition of the most capable modern armaments, surveillance systems, sensors, and decision support to ensure decisive advantage over forces in our general area.
- Advocates a strong deterrent element in the ADF.
- Believes the ADF must be capable of protecting commercial shipping both within Australian waters and beyond, in conjunction with allies.
- Endorses the development of the capability for the patrol and surveillance of all of Australia's ocean areas, its island territories and the Southern Ocean.
- Supports Government initiatives for rebuilding an Australian commercial fleet capable of supporting the ADF and the carriage of essential cargoes to and from Australia including in times of conflict.
- Supports Government intention to increase maritime preparedness and increase defence expenditure to 4.0% of GDP.
- Urges the strength and capabilities of the Army (including particularly the Army Reserve) and Air Force be enhanced, and the weaponry, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, cyberspace and electronic capabilities of the ADF be increased, including an expansion in its UAS, UUV capability.
- The Navy League believes maritime Defence requires a joint integrated endeavour across Navy, Army and Air Force.
- Considers that the level of both the offensive and defensive capabilities of the RAN should be strengthened, in particular with a further increase in the number of surface combatants noting the need to ensure indispensable fuel and other supplies, and the many other essential maritime tasks.
- Recommends bringing forward the start date of the destroyer replacement program to both strengthen the RAN and mitigate the local industry capability gap.
- Recommends the urgent replacement and increase in numbers of the current mine-countermeasure force.
- Strongly supports the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines.
- Recommends very early action to provide a strategic submarine base on the Eastern seaboard and further development of Western Australia facilities.
- Notes the potential combat effectiveness and flexibility of the STOVL version of the Joint Strike Fighter (F-35B Lightning II) and supports further examination of its application within the ADF through the LHDs.
- Supports the development of Australia's defence industry, including strong research and design organisations capable of the construction and maintenance of all warships, submarines, and support vessels in the Navy's order of battle, and welcomes the Government decision to provide a stable and continuous shipbuilding program.
- Advocates the retention in maintained reserve of operationally capable ships that are required to be paid off for resource or other economic reasons.
- Supports a strong and identifiable Naval Reserve with consideration as to remobilising the Port Divisions in support of securing the maritime and homeland base.
- Promotes and supports the Australian Navy Cadets organisation.
- Advocates urgent Government research and action to remedy the reported serious naval recruiting and retention problem.

As to the RAN, the League, while noting vital national peacetime tasks conducted by Navy, including border protection, flag showing/diplomacy, disaster relief, maritime rescue, hydrography and aid to the civil power:

- Supports the maintenance of a Navy capable of effective action in hostilities and advocates a build-up of the fleet and its afloat support elements to ensure that, in conjunction with the Army and RAAF, this can be sustained against any force which could be deployed in our area of strategic interest.

The League:

- Calls for a bipartisan political approach to national defence with a commitment to a steady long-term build-up in Australia's defence capability including the required industrial infrastructure.
- Believes that, given leadership by successive governments, Australia can defend itself in the longer term, within acceptable financial, economic and manpower parameters.



THE NAVY LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA

KEEP WATCH
EDUCATE; ADVOCATE; SUPPORT

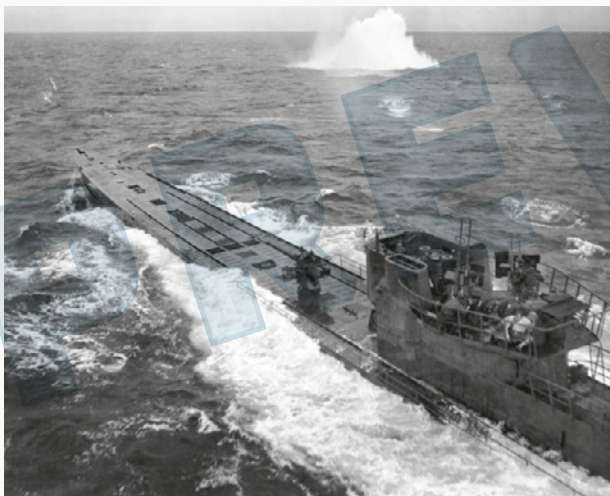


INTERESTING TIMES

It is often said, apocryphally, that wars are invented to teach Americans geography. For Australia, overseas conflicts serve a similar function: they remind us, abruptly and often painfully, that we are an island nation whose prosperity, lifestyle and national survival depend on the uninterrupted flow of maritime trade. OPERATION EPIC FURY should have reinforced this reality, first at the fuel bowser and then at the supermarket checkout. Yet it remains unclear whether the lesson has truly taken hold. Do Australians genuinely understand what it means to be girt by sea, not merely by beach, and the centrality of naval power to our national wellbeing? I am not convinced.

For 125 years, the Navy League has worked to keep this truth in the national consciousness. More than 98 per cent of Australia's trade by volume moves by sea. Fuel, medicines, vehicles, electronics, household goods, and fertilisers all arrive by sea. Our exports fund hospitals, roads, schools, and jobs. They sustain our standard of living. When the sea stops, Australia stops. Or as they say in Singapore 'no shipping, no shopping.'

Australians received a brief but telling glimpse of this vulnerability during COVID-19. Panic buying, and in some cases violence, over basic goods revealed how quickly social cohesion frays when supply chains falter. Maritime trade is therefore not merely an economic concern; it is a pillar of national and social stability.



The German U-Boat U848 coming under attack in the North Atlantic. Once the U-Boats had been defeated it was only a matter of time before Europe was liberated.

Ironically, the geography that has long protected us, the so-called tyranny of distance, also creates acute exposure and vulnerability. Our extended sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are inherently vulnerable, whether to hostile action such as submarine interdiction or to natural disruption from weather and climate events. On this history offers a stark warning.

During the Second World War, Britain came perilously close to defeat when unrestricted submarine warfare threatened to sever its maritime lifelines. Only the maturation of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) technology reversed that tide.

This context should frame the Government's 'haircut' to the *Hunter-class* frigate program. Reducing the number of the most advanced ASW vessels to ever be built serves only to advantage our adversary's submarine forces. While the *Mogami-class* is a capable platform, it cannot match the ASW performance the *Hunter-class* was designed to deliver, capability that is foundational, not optional, for a maritime trading nation.



A recent updated computer-generated image of the *Hunter-class* frigate. (BAE Systems Australia)

OPERATION EPIC FURY

The recent bi-lateral operation against Iran has underscored this point with unusual clarity. Naval power has proved a vital enabler throughout the campaign to date, and one event in particular, the first sinking of a warship by a U.S. submarine since the Second World War, illustrated both the utility of sea power and the persistent vulnerability of surface vessels without credible ASW capability.

Predictably, some critics of the sinking reached for the same arguments deployed after the sinking of the GENERAL BELGRANO in 1982. Yet the circumstances were unambiguous. The Iranian frigate had manoeuvred into a position that threatened coalition operations and international shipping. Its approach toward Diego Garcia, one of the campaign's critical airpower hubs, placed it within 31 hours of being able to interfere with or target ongoing sorties. Simultaneously, it was operating in one of the region's busiest maritime corridors, where even a single aggressive act could have triggered chaos.



A single Mk-48 torpedo lifted the Iranian frigate DENA out of the water and broke her back. The ship sank in minutes and underscored the importance of ASW. (US DoD)

The engagement itself was almost anticlimactic. The U.S. submarine's periscope remained up throughout, an extraordinary indicator of the Iranian vessel's ASW blindness. When the order came, a single torpedo ended the encounter. The frigate never detected the threat, never manoeuvred, never fired back.

Strategically, the sinking removed a looming threat to Diego Garcia, prevented disruption in a vital shipping lane, and reinforced coalition resolve. More broadly, it highlighted the decisive advantage conferred by undersea dominance, an advantage Australia cannot afford to neglect.

CHECK MATE

These lessons resonate far beyond the Middle East. With open war against China now inconceivable given Beijing's accelerating military build-up, the United States appears to potentially have adopted an *effects-based* approach that leverages naval power to squeeze China's global logistics lifelines, making it think twice about Taiwan ambitions. The effective loss of Venezuelan oil exports, combined with disruptions to Iranian supply, has materially affected Beijing's energy security calculus. China is increasingly forced to rely on more expensive Russian or spot-market crude, tightening refinery margins and exposing its economy to maritime chokepoints and geopolitical escalation outside of its control. This is Sea Power in action.

18 March 2026

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IT IS WITH REGRET THE FEDERAL COUNCIL OF THE NAVY LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA WILL INCREASE THE PRICE OF THE NAVY AT NEWSAGENTS TO \$12.95 PER COPY FROM JULY 2026.

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Which is the President's intent: so please encourage Membership or continue to buy the journal at your local Newsagent or gift to someone you know.

You are our backers – there is no Defence or industry backer, which is how we maintain our independence.

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY 125 EX KAKADU 2026

2026
INTERNATIONAL
FLEET REVIEW

A GLORIOUS NAVY DAY

Following torrential rain, the days preceding the International Fleet Review (IFR) to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Royal Australian Navy (cunningly disguised as *Exercise KAKADU 2026*), the morning broke fine – albeit confirming the old sailor's adage “*Red Sky at Night; Sailors Delight – Red Sky in Morning; Sailors Warning.*” For those not fortunate to be accommodated on board the fleet assembling or invited to attend official functions – there was opportunity to join a *Captain Cook's Cruise* ship. It was a moving sight to behold – sailing was at 0700 (sharp) and by 0600 there was already a line 1/2km long of sailors old, new and retired waiting patiently to board. In the wet and cold of a damp Saturday morning.



IFR 125 – EX KAKADU Ships Form Up for Ceremonial Entry to Sydney Harbour. (Image LSIS Susan Mossop)

The ships drew up the night before in fleet formation outside the Sydney Harbour heads ready for the Ceremonial Entry on the morning of 21 March 2026.



HMAS CANBERRA lines the upper deck, followed by JS KUMANO, FNS AUGUSTE BENEBIG, HMAS BRISBANE and HMPNGS FRANCIS AGWI (Image LSIS Susan Mossop)

Navies participating came from the RAN, the Indian Navy (Republic of Indian Navy), The Royal Malaysian Navy; the Philippine Navy; the Royal Thai Navy; the Vietnam People's Navy; the US Navy; the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Navy; the Royal Canadian Navy; the RNZN,

the Indonesian Navy; the French Navy (La Royale); the Republic of Fiji Navy; the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and the United Arab Emirates Navy. Without exception they did the RAN, their countries, and navies proud. The one noticeable absence was the Royal Navy. It is possible that HMAS ANSON was due to attend (the only operational UK SSN), prior to being deployed to the Gulf.



Mogami-class frigate JS KUMANO sails into Sydney Harbour IFR 125. (Image LSIS Danyellah Hall)

Professor Roy MacLeod PhD, DLitt, FAHA, FASSA, FSA, FRHistS, FRSN, Professor Emeritus of History University of Sydney and longstanding NLA NSW DIV Life Member, joined the NSW DIV President Mr Colin Bold on board the Tall Ship *James Craig* for their informal review of the Fleet. Writing movingly to the Editor, after the event, Roy commented:

Well,, we saw the 'review' – indeed, I think we were reviewed ourselves – such a beautiful day, and so many ships, even so making such a little impression on 'our' magnificent harbour.

Copies of *THE NAVY* celebrating 125 years were given to us all (courtesy of Colin Bold)! I turned to the masthead and told everyone about the Journal, its Editorial Board, and what the NLA does.

Have you seen (or been aboard) one of the new Japanese frigates of which we're to have 11?—one of which was in the review— passing to the starboard, its crew in resplendent whites and of course utterly precise.

As for the profile of the ship itself- It just took our breath away. I know nothing of its lethality, or its internal arrangements, but from where we were, it rose as a beautiful work of art and naval architecture. Assuming they are somehow drone-proof, I'd be tempted to buy more!

Best regards, Roy M.

By Ed: Roy the NLA concurs wholeheartedly with your comments about the *Mogami-class*, they are indeed lethal ships and just what Navy needs today. Navy could do with more and additional CWIS mounts would not go amiss.



Bradleys Head Australian White Ensign hoisted SYDNEY I Ceremonial Colours HMAS CANBERRA Saluting. (Image LSIS Nadav Harel)

All ships entering Sydney Harbour dipped their ensigns to HMAS SYDNEY 1 at Bradley's Head, a mark of respect reciprocated in time honoured fashion by sailors parading at the masthead.



USS FITZGERALD passes HMAS CANBERRA on Ceremonial Entry to Garden Island for Navy 125. (Image WOIS Damian Palwlenko)

USS FITZGERALD entered the Harbour somewhat later than the main fleet due, undoubtedly, to the operational pressures facing the USN at this moment. She cut a fine figure as she came up harbour, to moor astern HMAS CANBERRA in Garden Island, Fleet Base East.



RAN MH-60R helicopter dips the AWE on flying over HMAS SYDNEY I AWE Bradleys Head. (Image SBLT Jonathan Rendell)

The Fleet Air Arm also participated, here seen "dipping" the Australian White Ensign (instead of a dipping buoy) as an MH-60R flew past HMAS SYDNEY I masthead.



Reviewing Ship HMAS LEEUWIN reviews HMAS CANBERRA Navy 125. (Image WOIS Damian Pawlenko)

The day included a ceremonial entry of ships (6:00 am -12:00 pm), an official review of the Fleet by the Governor-General, a 21-gun salute, and an aerial display featuring Navy and Air Force assets.

Crowds were amassed on all the harbour points and lookouts, keen to participate and see the remarkable spectacle of maritime precision, reviews, flypasts, and pride unfolding before them. The rain that had held off for the morning, broke in the afternoon with heavy showers. No one moved as the Governor General, Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC – Patron of the Navy League of Australia – sailed past in HMAS LEEUWIN, the umbrellas went up and people gathered under makeshift covers and kagouls. They were honouring their Navy as Sydneysiders have done for 125 years. Quiet, dignified, steadfast. They did Navy and Australia proud.

Well done Chief of Navy – you and the RAN pulled it off! It was a ship shape day indeed. ■





TRIPLE THREAT: DOUBLE DIP

Defence faces a “triple threat” crisis:

1. Underfunding, cuts and defence cost inflation leading to a, potentially unrecoverable, *double dip* Defence recession;
2. Re-baselining of Defence to reflect reduced size (leading to additional cuts), and;
3. The imposition of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), leading to reductions in ADF size and selling off the Defence Estate.

The *triple threat* all contributing to a *double-dip recession* in Australia’s Defence capability – the collapse in morale (Air Force unable to afford fuel or Navy to paint its ships); the loss of billets; and the reduction / sacking of the Reserve workforce (the one contingency Defence had) – all at a time of increased existential threat.

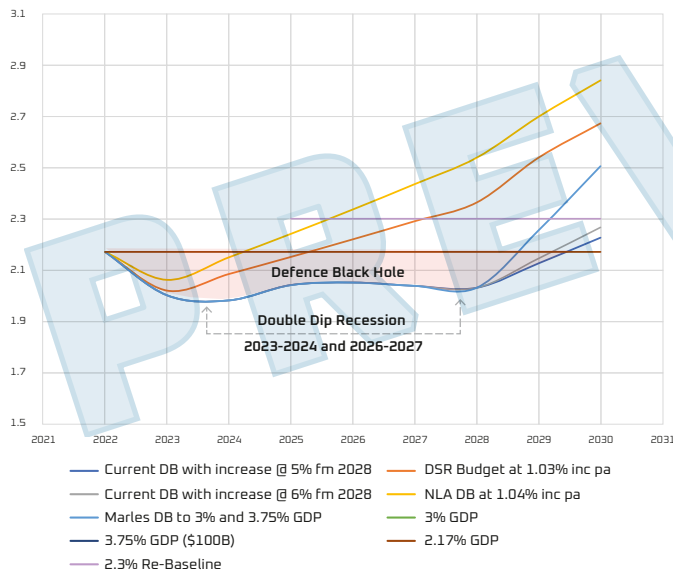


Figure 1: Defence Double Dip Recession

The concerns raised by *THE NAVY* of a “double-dip recession” in Australia’s Defence capability reflects the Government’s current management of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Severe personnel cuts, reductions in base infrastructure, and a lack of immediate, substantial funding to implement the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) are creating a hollowed-out force. Consequently, crippling the ADF in the 2026-2029 period, with recovery in the 2029-2032 timeframe most unlikely due to budgetary priorities that favour the “Welfare Industrial Complex” (WIC) over national security.

RE-BASELINING

In 2025 and 2026, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) underwent a profound “re-baselining” of its workforce, driven by a combination of recruitment failures, fiscal constraints, and the structural reforms of the 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS). This included the “Re-baselining” of 5,000 ADF personnel, a purge of Senior Officers (1-Star and Above), and cutting the Reserve Force and Days including a 33% reduction in reserve training allocations to prioritise specialised “high-end” capabilities like the Cyber Reserve Concept.

As of 2026, five Thousand personnel positions have been removed, with 2,000 more expected (including potentially a full Army Brigade). The Government has “wiped” funding for thousands of ADF members to address years of failing to meet recruitment targets. Instead of treating this as a crisis of recruitment, the government has adjusted its targets downward—from 64,532 to 59,373 in 2025-26—effectively turning a failure of leadership into a structural reduction in capability.

The Government has prioritised the “Welfare Industrial Complex” – broadly, social spending, cost-of-living relief, and domestic social infrastructure, over national security. In 2026 the NDIS is due to grow by 8% (\$5B) – down on the 10-20% of previous years!

The “double dip” Defence recession stems from the compounding effect of these cuts. First, there is an immediate reduction in operational capacity. Second, and more dangerously, the “ghost soldiers” (positions funded but not occupied) and the removal of training, maintenance, and reserve capabilities directly weaken the force structure. The indication of an Army Brigade being affected in 2026 coincides with the “rebalancing” of the Army, where, despite some elements growing, many units have faced uncertainty in structure, and substantial cuts to land-based vehicle projects have been implemented.

While geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific are rapidly accelerating, the Government’s response in terms of funding (\$50B over a decade, roughly \$5B per year – less than the \$6-7B a year being removed through cuts, freezing and inflation) is “walking backwards”.

US ARMED FORCES INCREASE RECRUITMENT

Rather than cutting personnel positions to meet leadership and recruiting failures, in fiscal year 2025, the United States military experienced its highest recruiting mission achievement in more than 15 years. Reversing several years of critical shortfalls.

Every active-duty branch—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force—met or exceeded their recruiting goals for the year. This shift followed a series of executive actions by the Trump administration, including the “Restoring America’s Fighting Force” initiative, which aimed to abolish Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and pivot the military’s focus back toward “lethality and readiness”.

While the administration attributes the surge to its “America First/Go Alone if Necessary” (USF/GAIN) and anti-DEI policies, other structural changes also contributed to the 2025 turnaround:

- **Future Soldier Preparatory Course:** This program, launched in late 2022 and expanded in 2025, helps lower-performing recruits meet academic or fitness standards. It has a 95% success rate and contributed to approximately 30% of the Army’s recruits in 2025.
- **Streamlined Accession:** A new medical records pilot program reduced waiting times for recruits from 10 days to one day or less, preventing potential candidates from losing interest during the process.
- **Financial Incentives:** Congress increased military pay by 4.5% in early 2025, with junior enlisted members receiving an additional 10% raise. These bonuses and pay increases were cited in surveys as a primary motivator for 16-to-21-year-olds considering service.
- **Increased Troop Strength:** The fiscal 2026 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) boosted the DoD’s troop end strength by 26,100, aiming for 454,000 active-duty soldiers.

The Trump administration, led by President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, also implemented several executive orders to remove DEI from the federal workforce and military. The administration argued that these programs undermined leadership, merit, and unit cohesion, broke recruitment, while eroding force lethality:

- **Closing DEI Offices:** Shortly after inauguration, President Trump signed an executive order to dismantle federal DEI programs, placing all DEI staff on paid administrative leave and eventually laying them off.



The UK Continues to sell off RFA Vessels – RFA Wave Knight one of two sold in 2026. (Image UK MOD).

- **Restoring America’s Fighting Force Task Force:** This task force was established to oversee the abolition of DEI offices and any “vestiges” that the administration claimed subverted meritocracy or promoted “radical ideologies” like Critical Race Theory (CRT) and gender ideology.
- **Prohibition on “Woke” Training:** No element within the Department of Defense (DoD) is permitted to provide instruction on CRT, DEI, or gender ideology as part of military training or curriculum.
- **Rescinding Prior Mandates:** The administration reinstated military personnel who had been discharged for refusing COVID-19 vaccinations and ended the use of gender-neutral standards in some areas to focus on “biological truth”.

Secretary Hegseth also attributes recruiting improvements to the:

- **Policy Review:** The Pentagon launched a six-month review of the “operational effectiveness” of women in ground combat roles, 10 years after restrictions were originally lifted.
- **Standardised Fitness:** On June 1, 2025, the Army Fitness Test replaced the previous Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT), reimplementing gender-neutral standards to ensure physical readiness for combat.
- **Advisory Body Elimination:** The administration disbanded the Defense Department Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), which had been a staple for decades in advising on servicewomen’s issues.

WHO OWNS DEFENCE?

Many of the bases, HQs, and cadet units to be sold off pre-date Federation. They were essentially brought to Canberra when State militias, and colonial naval services decided to federate. West Australia never did.

These Defence estates connect to local communities – all can belong and walk through the gates, by serving. Or in national emergencies (such as floods and fires), when these bases and units also serve.

The Defence Estates are Commonwealth and State, not Canberra, properties – for which Defence is the custodian. On sale, they will never return to Commonwealth and will probably become gated communities – no longer a common good.

For many Australians, these sites have deep cultural meaning and belonging – from before Federation. Imagine for one moment, that Uluru was to be sold off? When these priceless Commonwealth assets are sold, Defence will need to replace them. Even the accountants and *Big Four* must wonder at a deal that costs Defence up to

\$18B (it does not have) for \$1.8B in sales. At a time when Defence Estates need to be growing...

The “disastrous” nature of the defence estate today is a testament to the fact that military land is not just real estate – and it should never have been reviewed by those who treated it as such.

MORE OF THE SAME

DPM and Defence Minister Richard Marles and Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy announced in March 2026 they are leading a major restructuring and increase in Australian defence spending, announcing the creation of a new *Defence Delivery Agency* (DDA), Key 2026 Initiatives include:

- **National Defence Strategy 2026:** A new strategy for advancing deterrence is being launched.
- **Advanced Capabilities Investment Fund:** A \$500 million (potentially \$1 billion) fund to support AI, cyber, and underwater warfare, with a focus on private capital.
- **Accelerated Spending:** The government has brought forward \$1 billion in investment to speed up capability delivery.

There is no new money promised. The \$100B Defence Budget will not be realised in the 2033-34 timeline. Instead, the “double dip Defence recession,” puts spending in line to reach 2.3% in the same timeframe, not 3.5%

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

In a series of discussions reported by Peter Hartcher for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Elbridge Colby—the current US Undersecretary of Defence for Policy in the Trump administration—has challenged the reliability of the US “nuclear umbrella” for Allies like Australia.

Key points from his statements include:

- **Doubt on Extended Deterrence:** Colby stated it is “obviously not going to happen” that a US president would risk American cities to defend an ally against a nuclear-armed adversary like North Korea or China.
- **The “Five Cities” Rule:** He explicitly argued that no US president would risk losing “five American cities” for a conflict where the stakes for Americans are perceived as too low.
- **Ally Self-Reliance:** As a principal author of the *2026 US National Defence Strategy*, Colby moved away from mentioning “extended deterrence” (the nuclear umbrella). Instead, the strategy emphasises that allies must take “primary responsibility” for their own defence.
- **Nuclear Options for Australia:** Colby suggested “all options” should be on the table, including nuclear sharing (hosting US weapons) or Australia potentially acquiring its own nuclear ballistic submarines (SSBN) to preserve alliances in a realistic way.
- **AUKUS Criticism:** While a “fan” of Australia’s loyalty, Colby previously labelled the AUKUS submarine deal “crazy” because it diverts critical US resources (*Virginia-class* submarines) when they are most needed for potential conflict with China.

Note: this last criticism of AUKUS may recently have been allayed, when three RAN members serving on a US *Virginia-class* submarine took part in the attack of an Iranian frigate, in international waters off Sri Lanka.



GREENWICH STATION

In the quiet, sunlit corridors of the *Navy League of Australia*, we have long maintained a watchful eye on our progenitors in the United Kingdom. For decades, the Royal Navy (RN) served as the standard-bearer for maritime excellence, a “blue-water” force capable of global reach that provided the strategic umbrella under which Commonwealth interests thrived. However, in early 2026, the data emerging from London paints a harrowing picture of a force in terminal decline—a process of decimation so profound that recovery appears increasingly unlikely in this generation.

In maritime strategy, as in life, there is no substitute for being there. For over a century, the *Navy League of Australia* has advocated that a strong Navy is indispensable to a nation’s security. Yet, as we look toward our traditional partner, the United Kingdom, we witness a maritime power in the throes of a profound “say-do gap”—a term coined by Air Marshal Edward Stringer (Rtd) in his seminal January 2026 *Policy Exchange* Research Note, see Paper 1. The reality is stark: the UK is “carrying a small stick while talking loudly” and the resulting decimation of the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Marines (RM) may now be beyond a “quick fix”.

The Decimation of the Surface Fleet

For those following the scholarly discourse in *THE NAVY* magazine, these warnings are not entirely new. Writing across two decades, Morant (2006, 2020) presciently tracked the slow erosion of the UK’s sovereign industrial base and the “managerialist” rot that has prioritised accountants over admirals. This theme has been echoed by a formidable cohort of contributors to this magazine—Julian Lindley-French (2016), Blake, Foreman (2017), Schweikert, ANSON (2020), Molan (2021), Joiner, Skinner, Baird, and Reay Atkinson. Collectively, their analysis has pointed to a “graceless degradation” of the Royal Navy’s core competencies.

As of early 2026, the Royal Navy’s escort strength has reached a historical nadir. While the Government speaks of a “Golden Age of Shipbuilding,” the current reality is a “Brutal Reality”. The aging Type 23 frigate fleet is approaching the end of its lifespan, with maintenance periods growing longer and fewer ships ready for war. At the start of this year, only seven frigates were officially “in service,” and even fewer were deployable for high-end combat operations.

This decline is not merely a matter of numbers but of “wilful impotence,” as argued in previous editions of *THE NAVY*. The “say-do gap” is most evident here: the government promises 2.5% of GDP for defence, yet delivery of the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates remains years away, leaving a capability gap that adversaries are already exploiting. As Morant (2006, 2020) has long cautioned, a navy cannot be “surged” into existence; it is the product of decades of consistent investment in hulls, hearts, and minds.

The Royal Marines: A Force Without a Platform?

The Royal Marines, once the world’s premier amphibious force, face an existential crisis. The potential withdrawal of the Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) and even the Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliary) HMAS CHOULES’ sister ships in the UK has led the NLA President Mark Schweikert to warn of a “deplatformed” future. If the RM are reduced to a “coastal response” force without the heavy lift required for global reach, the UK loses its primary tool for littoral strike and deterrence.

The “Future Commando Force” concept, while intellectually ambitious, has often served as a linguistic shroud for the reduction of mass. As *Policy Exchange* highlights, the hollowing out of support infrastructure means that “not a single formation in the British military is currently sustainable in combat as a sovereign entity”.



HMAS PENGUIN also RN Dive and Medical School due to be partially sold off – opposed locally, but supported by the local MP. (Image LSPH Yuri Ramsey)

The “small stick” Stringer refers to is now so brittle that any attempt to “talk loudly” on the world stage risks immediate embarrassment. The UK’s reliance on American “supporting elements”—logistics, heavy lift, and satellite architecture—is no longer a strategic choice but a desperate necessity. With the potential for American withdrawal or pivoting away from European theatres, the UK’s maritime facade is being stripped bare.

The Personnel Crisis: Taking the Boys from the Toys?

The most critical “hollowing out” is not in steel, but in people. This has raised alarm regarding ADF and RN crewing, noting that the promotion of identity politics over “Country, Crown, and Commonwealth” has potentially impacted the “will to fight”. Furthermore, the Greenwich Hospital/RNRMC study released in February 2026 predicts the former serving population will decline by a third by 2040. The “self-reliance” of the naval community often masks a crisis where support is only sought at the breaking point.

A Culture of ‘Business as Usual’

Why has this happened? Contributors to *THE NAVY* have consistently identified a failure of leadership and a “business as usual” mindset within procurement agencies. Morant (2020) argued that the momentum of decline, once established, becomes culturally embedded. Stringer confirms this, stating that procurement agencies have simply not absorbed the “seriousness of the times”.

Billions are being absorbed by troubled programs like the AJAX armored vehicle—a symbol of procurement failure—while the maritime core is starved of the basic “behind-the-scenes” support required to function. The government promises salvation in the 2030s, but as *THE NAVY* has often noted, you cannot rebuild sovereign capability, industrial depth, or specialised skills in a year or two once they have been allowed to lapse.

The Illusion of Recovery

The UK Government has set target dates in the 2030s for fleet renewal, but Stringer rightly argues these are “far too late”. The “business as usual” approach of procurement agencies, which continue to sink billions into troubled programmes like AJAX while maritime assets wither, suggests a lack of strategic grip. Julian Lindley-French has previously described the *Global West* as “*all at sea*,” with the elite political-managerialist classes disconnected from the harsh realities of maritime power.

The “say-do gap” is not just a British problem; it is a warning to Australia. We cannot afford the “Defence Complacency” that has hollowed out our closest ally. As R.C. Blake has advocated, we need a *Versatile Modular Ship* design and an expanded order of battle to avoid the same fate. The Royal Navy may yet recover, but only if it closes the gap between its rhetoric and its reality. Until then, it remains a “small stick” in an increasingly dangerous world. ■



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ROC HAI KUN (S711)
Taiwan's first indigenous
submarine commencing
sea trials 2025.

Image ROC Navy

MATCH



JMSDF launches sixth
Taigei-class submarine
JS SOGEI (SS518)
October 2025.

Image Japan MoD

DESPATCH



The long nuclear tail – 34 years
since being decommissioned
HMS SWIFTSURE (S126) 1973-92
is to be dismantled in 2026.

Image UK MOD