

# TIME FOR A COASTGUARD

Maritime threats require a structural rethink



Jennifer Parker

November 2024

OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 5

Australian Naval Institute



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**Back cover image:** Royal Navy Offshore Patrol Vessel, HMS Spey, and Royal Australian Navy Armidale Class Patrol Boat, HMAS Childers 06 September 2023. Image credit Defence Images.

## Acknowledgments

The author is deeply grateful for the support and guidance of numerous individuals and organisations who provided invaluable opportunities to share and refine ideas. In particular, she extends her thanks to the UNSW Naval Studies Group, VADM Peter Jones (Retd), Commodore Jack McCaffrie (Retd), Commodore Peter Leavy (Retd), Dr. John Reeve, Mr. John Mortimer, Professor Cameron Moore, Professor Bec Strating, Mr. Marc Ablong, and many others who contributed insights and suggestions. Nonetheless, the ideas, conclusions, and any errors remain solely the responsibility of the author.

## About the author

**Jennifer Parker** is an Expert Associate at the National Security College, Australian National University and an Adjunct Fellow in naval studies at the University of New South Wales Canberra. Jennifer also holds the position of Nancy Bentley Associate Fellow in Indo-Pacific Maritime Affairs at the Council on Geostrategy.

Jennifer hosts and produces the weekly Maritime Matters podcast the Australian Naval Institute's Saltwater Strategists podcast focused on Indo-Pacific maritime affairs.

Published in a number of major Australian newspapers, Jennifer is regularly featured in Australian and international print, digital, radio and TV media.

Jennifer served for more than 20 years with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). During her time in the RAN Jennifer specialised as a Principal Warfare Officer, including undertaking deep specialist training with the Royal Navy in Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer.

Jennifer has extensive operational experience from the Middle East to the Caribbean, and most areas in between. She has undertaken a series of naval appointments nationally and internationally in areas including force design strategy, career management, international exercise planning and operations. That included service as an exchange officer with the Royal Navy and as second in command of HMAS Darwin, one of the Royal Australian Navy's guided missile frigates.

Jennifer's last appointment in the RAN was as Director of Operations in Bahrain of the Combined Maritime Forces, a 38-nation coalition promoting national security in the Middle East and Indian Ocean region.

Jennifer holds multiple tertiary qualifications including a Bachelor of Arts (Maths, Politics) from the University of New South Wales, Bachelor of Law (1st Hons) from the University of New England, Master of Arts in Strategy and Security from the University of New South Wales, and a Master of Laws from the Australian National University.

Jennifer has been admitted to the ACT Supreme Court as a legal practitioner and is current undertaking a Doctorate researching Australian maritime strategy at the University of Wollongong, Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security.

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First published November 2024

Published in Australia by the Australian Naval Institute

[www.navalinstitute.com.au](http://www.navalinstitute.com.au)

Australian Naval Institute



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**Maritime threats require a structural rethink:**

**Time for a coastguard**

**Jennifer Parker**

# Maritime threats require a structural rethink:

## Time for a coastguard

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## Abbreviations

ABF	Australian Border Force
ADF	Australia Defence Force
AMSA	Australian Maritime Safety Authority
DSR	Australian 2023 Defence Strategic Review
ECCPBs	Evolved Cape Class Patrol Boats
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
IUU	Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing
NDS	Australian 2024 National Defence Strategy
OPV	Offshore Patrol Vessel
USCG	United States Coast Guard

## Key Points

- Maritime Border Command (MBC) was established in 2005 to provide a command and control construct that could address the full spectrum of civil maritime security challenges.
- MBC has relied heavily on Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel and assets to execute its functions since its establishment.
- Maritime threats are evolving. Increasingly, maritime infrastructure is being targeted globally and the divide between civil and military threats in the maritime domain is being blurred. This trend is readily apparent in the Indo-Pacific.
- As a maritime nation, Australia does not have an organisation or set of capabilities capable of managing these threats. The National Defence Strategy (NDS) makes it clear that Defence is to focus on higher-end threats, and the Australian Border Force (ABF) is a civil law enforcement organisation that lacks the capacity, expertise, funding and mandate to manage emerging maritime threats.
- The evolution of maritime threats and the lack of an Australian capability to deal with these threats requires a rethink of Australia's maritime security arrangements and the establishment of an Australian coastguard.

## Policy Recommendations

1. The Australian Government conduct a review into Australia's maritime security requirements, including consideration of a coastguard. This review should consider streamlining existing maritime agencies where feasible under a coastguard, with a particular focus on Australia's search and rescue and fisheries management functions.
2. The Australian Government establish a coastguard as a separate statutory authority under the Minister for Home Affairs.
3. The Department of Home Affairs transfer the ABF marine unit personnel, capability and contracted ABF aircraft to the coastguard where appropriate.
4. The Australian Department of Defence transfer its patrol boat and offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) to the coastguard, including personnel where appropriate.
5. Consideration be given to the transfer of several Royal Australian Airforce Force (RAAF) C27 Spartan's to the coastguard as part of a broader coastguard capability review.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The RAAF operates 10 C27 Spartan light tactical aircraft. The US Coast Guard uses C27s as its medium range surveillance aircraft. C27s are nearly 70% cheaper than a RAAF P8 Poseidon aircraft, which are currently tasked to support some MBC missions.



6. The Australian Government transfer responsibility for the lead authority on law enforcement operations within Australia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and territorial waters to the coastguard.<sup>2</sup>
7. The Australian Government create a Coastguard Act and amend the Defence Act 1903 to account for the transfer of the coastguard to the Department of Defence in the event of crisis or conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> There will be occasions where Defence is required to support constabulary operations lead by a coastguard, similar to Defence requirements to assist the civil community.

## Introduction

The Defence Strategic Review (DSR) states that Australia is facing its ‘most challenging strategic environment since the Second World War’.<sup>1</sup> The NDS states that ‘Australia’s strategic environment demands a fundamentally new approach to the defence of Australia and its interests’.<sup>2</sup>

A key feature of the challenging strategic environment is the evolution of maritime threats. The peacetime differentiation between civil and military maritime threats is eroding. China’s use of its coastguard and maritime militia in the South China Sea to harass regional fisherman and coastguards is a clear example,<sup>3</sup> as is the weaponisation of large Chinese fishing fleet’s that undertake illegal fishing on an industrial scale.<sup>4</sup> Maritime infrastructure from ports to pipelines and submarine cables are increasingly being targeted as a form of grey zone warfare. Russia has weaponised irregular migration at land borders in Europe,<sup>5</sup> and it is not unlikely that irregular maritime migration could be weaponised in future as a hybrid threat. These examples demonstrate lines between civil and military threats in the maritime domain are blurring.

The evolution of maritime security threats to Australia is complicated by the vastness of its maritime domain and its reliance on maritime resources. With a coastline of nearly 60,000 kilometres,<sup>6</sup> Australia possesses the world’s third-largest EEZ, covering over 10 million square kilometres—larger than its landmass.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Australia’s search and rescue region spans almost 53 million square kilometres, or one-tenth of the Earth’s surface.<sup>8</sup> This immense maritime domain presents substantial challenges for maritime law enforcement and broader security operations. The reduced warning time for potential conflicts in the region only exacerbates these vulnerabilities, further complicating the maritime security landscape.

This paper will highlight that Australia does not presently have an organisation with the capability to manage the civil elements of Australia’s maritime security in the face of the evolution of maritime threats, and the challenging strategic environment. An issue of structure, capability, training and investment that should be addressed through the establishment of an Australian coastguard.

## What is a Coastguard

A coastguard, in its broadest sense, is a paramilitary organisation responsible for managing maritime law enforcement within a country’s maritime zones. The specific structure and functions of coastguards vary widely across the globe, reflecting the unique maritime security needs of each nation. Generally, coastguards are tasked with a range of critical responsibilities, including maritime law enforcement, fisheries protection, and search and rescue operations.

For example, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) plays a vital role in protecting the nation’s maritime interests, engaging in drug interdiction, environmental protection, and ensuring safe navigation. The USCG also plays a broader role in international engagement, deploying to regions such as the Middle East and the Pacific, among others. It supports efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing,<sup>9</sup> with a presence that is often more readily accepted than that of a navy,<sup>10</sup> particularly in addressing maritime law enforcement issues.

The UK coastguard focuses on search and rescue, maritime security but also vessel traffic management and civil and emergency disaster response.<sup>11</sup>

Coastguards are typically equipped with a range of assets, including ships, aircraft, and specialised equipment, allowing them to effectively perform their duties. They also maintain professional training pipelines to ensure their personnel are skilled in areas such as navigation, emergency response, and legal enforcement. This professionalisation is often more akin to a paramilitary and enhances their ability to bridge the divide between maritime law enforcement and some military missions. However, crucially, and in contrast to a navy, a coastguard functions primarily as a maritime law enforcement agency, with capabilities that can be scaled to support other roles when needed.

In Australia, however, the role of volunteer coastguard organisations differs significantly from that of traditional coastguards. While volunteer groups, such as the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard,<sup>12</sup> provide valuable services like search and rescue and maritime safety education, they lack the formal authority, operational capabilities and scale of a true coastguard. These volunteer organisations primarily rely on trained volunteers and do not have the same level of resources, including dedicated vessels, aircraft, or law enforcement powers. As a result, while they play a crucial role in enhancing maritime safety, they are not considered formal coastguards, which typically operate under government authority and possess the mandate to enforce maritime laws and regulations.

## Current structure: The problem set

Unlike many of its Southeast Asian, Indian Ocean and Pacific neighbours Australia does not have a coastguard.<sup>3</sup> Australia's civil maritime functions are executed by several agencies. Notably, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) coordinates Australia's maritime search and rescue functions, whilst MBC coordinates and executes Australia's civil maritime security operations.

Established in 2005,<sup>13</sup> MBC is a multi-agency taskforce that relies on ADF and ABF assets to execute its role. The original iteration of MBC, Joint Offshore Protection Command was established as a result of the classified Tonkin review.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis and recommendations of the Tonkin review are not publicly available, but it is publicly known that the review recommended a multi-agency maritime security structure designed to task, rather than own and operate, civil and military assets assigned to the headquarters.<sup>15</sup>

The Tonkin review also reportedly considered the establishment of a coastguard but ultimately decided against it. The reasons for this decision are not clear in the public domain. However, given the evolution of maritime security threats and the deterioration of Australia's strategic environment over the past 20 years, it is prudent to revisit the recommendations of this report.

MBC operates under the Department of Home Affairs. It is commanded by a two-star admiral in the RAN, who, for the purposes of MBC command, is also a sworn officer in the ABF. This

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst Australia does presently have an 'Australian Volunteer Coastguard' this organisation is neither designed nor equipped to execute the functions of a coastguard proposed in this paper (<https://coastguard.com.au/>).

dual role allows the Commander of MBC to direct assets from both the ADF and the ABF.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, MBC does not possess its own assets or personnel; instead, its multi-agency structure relies on support from the relevant maritime security agencies.

This is an important distinction, as the MBC is often referred to as 'like a coastguard' or a de facto coastguard. However, the similarities are limited. While MBC is responsible for coordinating maritime law enforcement beyond state jurisdiction, 3 nautical miles from Australia's coast,<sup>17</sup> it is fundamentally a coordination body. Staffed primarily by personnel from the ADF and ABF, MBC directs assets from both the ADF and the ABF. MBC is also not responsible for common coastguard functions, such as search and rescue. This organisational structure distinguishes MBC from traditional coastguard entities.

Two decades after the Tonkin review the strategic environment and the nature of maritime threats have changed, while several issues have emerged with the MBC construct.

### A Contested Maritime Domain

Globally the maritime domain is increasingly contested from Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea; to maritime battles in the Black Sea following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; targeting of maritime infrastructure in Europe and increased aggression in the South China Sea, and maritime north and east Asia. This contestation of the maritime domain means that the RAN's role since the 2004 Tonkin review has changed. These changes require the RAN, and the ADF more broadly to prioritise their focus on traditional high-end warfare as articulated in the DSR.<sup>18</sup>

While the deterioration of Australia's strategic circumstances and the increasing contestation in the maritime domain call for a renewed role for the RAN beyond border protection, the evolving complexity of civil maritime threats means the current structure of the MBC and the ABF maritime unit are ill-equipped to address them. This includes the growing scale of non-traditional maritime security threats, such as illegal fishing and irregular migration driven by regional instability, as well as the use of non-traditional threats for military purposes, such as presence operations or the targeting of Australian maritime infrastructure.

This evolution of threats also poses questions about which organisation in Australia's current complex maritime security architecture is responsible for responding to them. For example, it is unclear in Australia's maritime security strategy documentation who is responsible for port security or the protection of subsea cables, offshore oil platforms, ports, the list goes on.

### Over-Reliance on ADF Assets

While the maritime security landscape is much more complex than in 2004, the last two decades have also revealed the challenges with the current multi-agency construct. First and foremost is the construct's over-reliance of ADF assets and personnel.

The current MBC structure of over 1000 staff rely heavily on ADF personnel,<sup>19</sup> under the command of a Navy two-star admiral. MBC does not have the assets to execute most of its functions without relying heavily on the ADF.

The ABF maritime unit workforce is approximately 550 personnel,<sup>20</sup> and it presently has 11 patrol vessels,<sup>4</sup> one large hull vessel,<sup>5</sup> and two fast response boats.<sup>21</sup> To assist in its maritime surveillance role the ABF leases 10 x Dash 8 aircraft and two helicopters.<sup>22</sup> A more civil maritime footprint for a country with the third largest EEZ in the world.

The Government recently established an Independent Analysis Team (IAT) to review the size and structure of the RAN's surface combatant fleet. The IAT considered Australia's minor war vessel requirements, recommending a total force of 25 minor war vessels, consisting of 14 naval vessels and 11 ABF vessels to undertake constabulary operations.<sup>23</sup> While the analysis behind this assessment isn't clear, what is clear is that this delineation relies too heavily on the Navy, with the Navy providing most MBC's constabulary operations capability.

Availability of the small number of ABF vessels has also been historically eroded by budgetary issues and lack of maritime expertise in their management.<sup>24</sup>

Not only does the current MBC structure place an unreasonable demand on ADF assets, but the current structure does not adequately provide for port protection or subsea cable protection; both of which will be targeted in the event of crisis of conflict. Subsea cable protection is conspicuously absent from Australia's Civil Maritime Strategy.<sup>25</sup>

Even if the capacity of the ABF maritime capabilities were enhanced to reduce the MBC reliance on the ADF, the ABF, under its current structure, would still lack the capability to manage such an expansion without a significant restructure. This underscores that, even with increased resources, the ABF would not be able to meet Australia's maritime security needs.

In the event of conflict, Australia's modest Navy will be required to protect seaborne supply to and exports from Australia, whilst undertaking offensive strike and power projection roles. It will not be able to support civil maritime roles and civil infrastructure protection.

In the current 'competition' environment there have been reports of billion-dollar warships being used to support constabulary functions.<sup>26</sup> The MBC draw on Australia's RAAF assets is just as significant, where ABF's 10 leased Dash 8 aircraft are reportedly regularly required to be supplemented by the RAAF's 14 \$250 million-dollar P8 aircraft designed for Anti-Submarine Warfare.<sup>27</sup> Such support already places a strain on the RAAF. Not only is this uneconomical, but it will not be feasible in the event of regional crisis or conflict. The NDS is clear that the ADF must be focused on high-end warfighting.

### Limitations in the Structure and Capability of the ABF Maritime Unit

Nearly two decades after the establishment of the first iteration of the MBC and almost one decade since the creation of the ABF maritime unit, we have gained valuable insights into their functioning and limitations.

Primarily due to its structure, the ABF has not developed the expertise in maritime capabilities and operations across the full spectrum of maritime threats.<sup>28</sup> A point made in

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<sup>4</sup> The description of 11 patrol vessels includes eight ABF Cape Class Patrol Boats, 2 ABF Bay Class Patrol Boats and ABF Cutter Thaiyak.

<sup>5</sup> ABF Cutter Ocean Shield.

2019 by Rear Admiral James Goldrick, the commander of MBC's Border Protection Command between 2006-2008, where he stated

'The current controversy suggests that Home Affairs may have underestimated the cost of maritime security and been too ready to balance its budget by seeking economies in the sea and air programs'.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the secrecy surrounding Australia's maritime border operations, there has been enough anecdotal reporting in the Australian press to provide evidence that the current structure has not worked effectively. This includes reporting on concerns around professionalism,<sup>30</sup> maintenance issues, and capacity.<sup>31</sup>

The position that the current ABF maritime unit structure is inadequate to meet Australia's civil maritime security needs is further reinforced by the 2018 ANAO audit into 'Cape Class Patrol Boat – In Service Support Arrangements' which concluded that:

'The department's arrangements to provide support to operations are partially effective. The department is developing but has not yet implemented appropriate workforce arrangements, contract management requires improvement, and the effectiveness of budget management has been constrained as the department is not yet well placed to accurately estimate, forecast, and control costs to operate and provide in-service support to the Cape Class patrol boats'.<sup>32</sup>

Assessing metrics for the ABF maritime unit is challenging, as government targets are not public. However, the 2018 ANAO Audit report indicates that, in 2016-2017, the target number of maritime patrol sea days for the unit was 3,320 days per financial year.<sup>33</sup> In 2023-2024, the ABF maritime unit completed 2,086 patrol days. Although the current patrol day targets are not known,<sup>34</sup> using the 2016-2017 targets as a guide, the ABF maritime unit would have achieved only 63% of its patrol day target in 2023-24. While this metric is not entirely precise, it highlights a significant issue.

The issue with the availability of sea days for the ABF maritime unit is also reflected in the limited availability of aerial surveillance capabilities.<sup>35</sup> To support its surveillance operations in the maritime domain, ABF leases 10 x Dash 8 aircraft fitted with specialised surveillance equipment.<sup>36</sup> Like the sea days target, the amount of aerial surveillance required by the government from the ABF is not publicly disclosed. The ABF website states that the leased aircraft provide between 13,500 – 1500 flying hours a year.<sup>37</sup> A 2021 ANAO audit of the management of the 'Civil Maritime Surveillance Services Contract,' which has been in place since 2016 with two extensions, indicated that the contractual target was 15,000 aerial surveillance hours per year.<sup>38</sup>

The Department of Home Affairs annual report for financial year 2023-24 stated that ABF achieved 12,579 aerial surveillance flight hours.<sup>39</sup> If the target flight hours are consistent with the 2021 ANAO audit report, this would mean the ABF achieved 84% of the required aerial surveillance hours.

At Senate Estimates in October 2023, the ABF Commissioner was questioned about a 6% decrease in sea patrol days and a 14% decrease in flying hours from the 2021-2022 annual report to the 2022-2023 annual report. In response, the ABF Commissioner stated:

'In general, the primary driver for the decrease in aerial surveillance flying hours is crew—the contractor's difficulties in recruiting pilots, in particular. And in relation to the sea patrol days, it is a combination of factors relating to the age of the fleet, deep level maintenance and blowouts in time frames to do deep level maintenance'.<sup>40</sup>

While the Acting ABF Commissioner in November 2024 Senate Estimates indicated an increase in sea patrol days and aerial surveillance hours,<sup>41</sup> the reality is that underperformance in these areas has been a consistent trend across multiple governments, with reports highlighting these issues well before the current challenges.

The 2017 Department of Immigration and Border Protection Annual Report revealed that the ABF only achieved 79% of its target sea days.<sup>42</sup> 2019 reporting indicated that Australia was 'falling short of its sea patrol target by 20%'.<sup>43</sup> The point being that the issue is not because of any one capability issue, or government policy setting. The issue is structural, with the current ABF maritime unit's structure, funding and capabilities being unfit for purpose.

The operational availability of ABF vessels is further hindered by the enterprise agreements that limit the flexibility and availability of personnel. As the ABF is a civilian organisation, as opposed to military or paramilitary organisation they are covered by workplace agreements that differ significantly from their ADF counterparts. An inconvenience in peacetime, this could not be accommodated in crisis or conflict.

Not only does the current structure rely to heavily on the ADF, but the ABF is a civilian-law-enforcement organisation that lacks the capability, flexibility and training to manage the nature of grey zone and hybrid maritime threats Australia will likely face. This is a different level of threat than traditional law enforcement and will require different capabilities and skillsets.

The lack of an organisation with the capability and expertise to manage these threats is further complicated by the over 30 organisations that have responsibility for maritime security issues in Australia.<sup>44</sup>

### Australian Maritime Strategy

The structural issues in Australia's maritime security framework are further compounded by the country's approach to maritime strategy, which creates a divide between civil and military pillars. Australia's Civil Maritime Strategy, released by the Department of Home Affairs in 2021,<sup>45</sup> explicitly excludes military-related aspects of maritime security, as well as issues concerning safety and pollution. Equally concerning is the lack of mention of subsea infrastructure, such as undersea cables, which are vital to Australia's connectivity—99% of the country's internet traffic travels through these cables.<sup>46</sup>

This bifurcation of Australia's maritime security strategy into civil and military domains is exacerbated by the absence of a publicly available military maritime strategy. While it is unclear whether such a strategy exists in the classified domain, the division between civil and military maritime security remains a glaring gap. As maritime threats evolve, this divide makes it easier for adversaries to exploit vulnerabilities at the intersection of civil and military concerns, where the blending of threats in the maritime domain is increasingly complex.

While the establishment of an Australian coastguard would not resolve these strategic issues, a professional and well-resourced paramilitary coastguard with responsibilities



across the full spectrum of peacetime, crisis, and conflict operations could help bridge the divide between civil and military maritime security.

## The Solution: A Coastguard

The evolution of maritime threats and the lack of Australian capability to respond to them mean that having the structure in place to support Australia's maritime home defence in the event of crisis or conflict is an immediate concern. Such structures must have the capacity to operate in parallel with the ADF without generating a significant impost on existing ADF capabilities.

Coastguard organisations, as paramilitary organisations are used across our region and globally to fill this role because they have the best of both worlds and are mandated to undertake both peacetime and wartime roles, for which they are expressly resourced, trained and equipped. A coastguard with civilian law enforcement powers, complemented by paramilitary training and capabilities, would be better equipped to address the full spectrum of maritime security challenges. This includes civil threats as well as grey zone and hybrid threats that straddle the civil-military divide, such as the targeting of civilian maritime infrastructure or the use of civilian assets for military purposes in Australian waters.

Across the Indo-Pacific there has been a trend of establishing or bolstering existing coastguards for this very reason.<sup>47</sup>

## Functions

There is no universal definition of a coastguard, functions of coastguards vary greatly depending on their country of origin. This paper proposes the functions of an Australian coastguard would be centred on three key principles:

- The responsibility for the protection in peacetime, crisis and conflict of Australia's maritime infrastructure,<sup>48</sup> including offshore oil and gas infrastructure;
- The protection of Australia from 'civil' maritime threats as defined by the Australian Civil Maritime Strategy without reliance on the ADF, except in exceptional circumstances;<sup>49</sup>
- Streamlining of Australian maritime security agencies where possible to reduce the complexity of Australia's maritime security architecture.

Based on these three key principles, the recommended functions of an Australian coastguard are as follows:

- Surveillance of Australia's maritime zones;
- Constabulary operations and border protection with Australia's territorial waters, EEZ and extended continental shelf;
- Maritime infrastructure protection including, but not limited to Australia ports and subsea cables;<sup>6</sup>
- Lead coordination agency for maritime counter-terrorism;

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<sup>6</sup> Protection of subsea cables is envisaged as a shared role with the RAN, based on capabilities, depth and distance from termination points on the Australian coastline.



- Coordination of search and rescue within Australia's Search and Rescue Region, and environmental incident response within Australia's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone; and
- Execution of Australian fisheries enforcement functions.

These functions would remain extant in both peace time and 'times of war' as defined by the *Defence Act*.<sup>50</sup>

## Structure

The coastguard should be established as its own independent statutory authority under the Minister for Home Affairs,<sup>7</sup> transferring to the Minister for Defence, under the Department of Defence in 'times of war' as defined by the *Defence Act*.<sup>51</sup> This departmental separation will be important to avoid the inevitable drain on Defence resources should it be established within the ministry of Defence and for political expediency civil threats such as irregular migration become a political focus. Notably, this is similar to the construct of the USCG that resides under the US Department of Homeland Security but may be transferred to the US Department of Defence at the direction of the US President or congress.

In principle, this is in line with the recommendations of the DSR that 'Defence should be the force of last resort for domestic aid to the civil community, except in extreme circumstances'.<sup>52</sup> The current construct of MBC relies heavily on the ADF due to limited ABF assets and ABF workforce availability using expensive ADF resources to supplement civil functions. Generating not only financial implications, but opportunity cost implications as ADF assets, particularly scarce maritime assets are required to support military objectives in competition, and potentially crisis and conflict.

The answer here is not simply bolstering the maritime unit of the ABF through increased funding. The structures of the ABF maritime unit are not such that they could readily support such an increase in capability,<sup>53</sup> it was not designed or trained to undertake the full burden of civil maritime security roles in the absence of the ADF and subsequently without a restructure and a move towards a paramilitary focus it is unlikely to be able to absorb such an injection of investment. The MBC multi-agency command structure relies on ADF skillsets, that could not easily be replaced by a bolstered ABF maritime unit – A complete restructure would be required.

To execute the more demanding functions required of it, the coastguard should have a paramilitary command structure more akin to Defence than that of a government department. Plenty of regional exemplars can be found on this point.

## Capabilities

The capabilities of an Australian coastguard must be aligned with its agreed functions, which should be a key focus of the recommended review.

The 2024 independent analysis of the surface combatant fleet recommended a total of 25 minor war vessels across the ABF and RAN, including six Arafura-class OPVs, eight Evolved Cape Class Patrol Boats (ECCPBs), and 11 ECCPBs for the ABF.<sup>54</sup> While the recommended

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<sup>7</sup> It is not the recommendation of this paper the Coastguard sit under the Department of Home Affairs, merely the Minister for Home Affairs.

maritime security review should determine the functions based on the required capabilities, it makes sense for the RAN's Arafura OPVs and Cape Class patrol boats to be transferred to the coastguard, especially considering the IAT's finding that the OPV 'does not possess the survivability and self-defence systems to contribute to a surface combatant mission'.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to transferring these capabilities, consideration must be given to the requirements for port protection, safeguarding critical maritime infrastructure (including subsea cables), and conducting operations in the Southern Ocean. These are current areas of vulnerability across both Australia's civil and military maritime capabilities and may necessitate the acquisition of additional specialised vessels.

The current arrangements for supporting Australia's civil maritime aerial surveillance rely on leasing fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, with the ADF providing support when these arrangements fail to meet the desired surveillance hours, which reportedly happens frequently.

While the review should determine the best approach for supporting the coastguard's aerial surveillance requirements, one option could be transferring several RAAF C-27 Spartans to the coastguard as part of a broader capability review. This option would need to be balanced against the impact on ADF airlift capabilities, but such a transfer could provide an immediate solution. Used by the USCG, this capability would offer a more cost-effective alternative to relying on expensive P-8s from the RAAF, as has occurred in the past.

The maintenance and support structure for the coastguard's maritime and aerial assets will be a critical consideration in its design. Many of the current availability issues within the ABF's maritime unit appear to stem from maintenance and sustainment challenges, so addressing this in the review will be important. This could prove to be one of the more costly aspects of the coastguard construct. While exploring public-private partnerships may help reduce costs, it could impact asset availability. Alternatively, following the Navy's Systems Project Office model could be considered. The pros and cons of each approach will need to be carefully weighed in the review.

### Workforce and Training

To execute the functions outlined above, an Australian coastguard would need to be a professional, disciplined paramilitary organisation. Recent media commentary has revealed challenges with the professionalism of some aspects of the ABF marine unit,<sup>56</sup> a capability challenge that would be further exposed in the event of crisis and conflict.

The impacts of professionalism within the ABF maritime unit are further compounded by the classification of the workforce as civilian employees, and their subsequent enterprise agreements which impact the operational availability and flexibility of ABF maritime units compared to their ADF counterparts. Both issues will require treatment in an Australia coastguard.

The establishment of a coastguard academy to support the generation of a disciplined paramilitary maritime force will be essential. This establishment will also have capacity to train regional coastguard personnel and could be scaled to provide training in support of

initiatives such as the Pacific Maritime Support Program,<sup>8</sup> and wider maritime initiatives including the maritime strategic fleet.<sup>57</sup> The specific structure should be a key focus of the recommended review, but it must strike a balance between law enforcement, mariner skills and qualifications, and certain aspects of use of force and broader military operations.

While industrial workplace relations are an essential part of any healthy workforce, the civilian employee classification of the ABF's maritime unit places difficult demands on its flexibility and operational availability; an impact that could not be supported in a disciplined paramilitary construct such as an Australian coastguard. Therefore, it is recommended that Australian coastguard members be considered 'Defence members' for the purposes of the *Defence Act*.<sup>58</sup> Defence members are not considered employees under the *Fair Work Act*,<sup>59</sup> and therefore would not be managed under enterprise agreement arrangements. Of course, coastguard members would need to be adequately remunerated to accommodate for this change in their conditions of service, as Defence members are. While this recommendation may be controversial, it will be key in an Australian coastguard execution of the functions detailed above.

It is difficult to see how such an arrangement as the classification of ABF maritime element personnel as 'Defence members' providing the flexibility of a paramilitary force in the event of crisis or conflict could happen without the establishment of a coastguard. Current ABF maritime element members are unlikely to support such a change, and such a change would need to come with a substantially revised remuneration package and review of conditions of service. This is better accommodated into the structural changes to support a coastguard.

From an ADF perspective, there will likely be two immediate workforce criticisms of an Australian coastguard. The first will be that its establishment will result in an immediate reduction of ADF personnel, particularly the Navy at a time that it is trying to grow. The second, and less credible argument will be that the Navy patrol vessels are an essential training ground for its warfare officers. On the latter point, whilst there are benefits to the Navy's junior warfare officers gaining ship handling and leadership experience in smaller vessels, this training can be accommodated through other means and despite the romanticism of patrol boats, many Navy officers do not serve in these vessels. In summary, it is hardly an argument worthy of structural consideration.

On the former argument, it is correct to anticipate the establishment of a coastguard will initially have an impact on ADF recruitment and retention numbers, with an immediate reduction in the Navy's core strength to be expected when its patrol force is transitioned to a coastguard. However, in many respects functionally this is already the case, with limited cross-pollination between the Navy's minor war vessel community and its major surface ships. The limited-cross pollination is generated by platform competencies, particularly in the engineering specialisations, locational stability and a preference for a different type of role – high end warfare versus constabulary operations.

In some respects, the generation of a coastguard in the medium term may bolster Navy retention whilst growing a widening mariner base in Australia. The Navy often struggles to

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<sup>8</sup> The Pacific Maritime Security Program is a package of capability, infrastructure, sustainment, training and coordination designed to increase national and regional maritime security for 16 nations, this includes 15 Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste (<https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement/maritime-capability>).

convince personnel who desire to serve on high-end warfighting functions to want to undertake constabulary roles and vice versa. The nature of a coastguard with set bases, roles and patrols will provide greater stability, particularly to those who wish to live in northern Australia. While, the Navy, free to focus on higher end warfare will have a significantly reduced requirement to upend its personnel to remote bases to undertake constabulary operations.

The establishment of a coastguard could also offer greater reserve options for Australia's mariner skill base in ways that the naval reserve currently cannot. One challenge with maintaining a skilled mariner base in the naval reserve is the technical expertise required, particularly in combat systems, weapons, and sensors. A coastguard reserve may be more easily established, as the focus would be on maritime operations rather than specialised combat skills. Furthermore, a seamless transfer between the coastguard and the Navy could be facilitated by creating a special naval reserve category for serving coastguard officers.

### Legal and Financial

The establishment of an Australian coastguard as an independent statutory authority will have several legal and financial considerations that will require greater consideration than the space in this paper allows. Legal considerations will include the need for a specific coastguard bill to mandate the roles and responsibilities of a coastguard. Notably, Kim Beazley, as opposition leader, introduced the Australian Coast Guard Bill to Parliament in 2001. While this paper does not propose this bill as the ideal model for 2024, it provides a valuable starting point.<sup>60</sup>

Amendments would also be required to the *Defence Act* and relevant acts enabling ABF maritime activities. Amendments to these acts would need to prioritise clarity to key stakeholders and provide a lawful authority for the coastguard.

While some capabilities can be transferred to a coastguard, additional funding will be necessary to enhance its capabilities and establish a training pipeline. In 2004, Labor estimated the cost of its proposed coastguard policy at \$303.6 million over four years,<sup>61</sup> which would be equivalent to \$505.1 million in 2023 dollars.<sup>62</sup> While this paper does not advocate for a specific coastguard structure, it is clear that the structure proposed by Labor in 2004 would be inadequate to deal with the current environment meaning the costs would not be directly comparable. However, in terms of scale, it is evident that the investment required for a coastguard would be significantly less than some of the current capability investments being made by Defence.

In order to support the management of complex maritime capabilities a coastguard would require a funding envelope certainty akin to that of the current Department of Defence structure, which has a funding profile provided for a 10-year period. This will be a significant commitment, however, on the whole coastguard capabilities are less expensive than diverting billion-dollar Defence capabilities to support civil maritime functions, and some savings may be generated by the amalgamation of search and rescue and fisheries enforcement functions into a coastguard.

### Conclusion

The nature of maritime threats is evolving, and as a maritime nation, Australia is increasingly exposed to these changes due to the vastness of our maritime domain and our dependence

on it. The domain is becoming more contested, placing greater demands on the RAN and ADF to operate further from Australia's shores. Meanwhile, maritime threats are shifting, with an increasing overlap between civil and military risks, particularly through the manifestation of grey zone and hybrid warfare in the maritime domain. This is most evident in China's use of fishing fleets for military purposes. The rising demand on the RAN, coupled with the growing complexity of civil maritime threats and the heightened risks to critical maritime infrastructure—such as ports and subsea cables—necessitates a rethinking of Australia's maritime security structures.

This complexity is further exacerbated by the bifurcation in how Australia understands civil and military maritime security, with its structures and strategies revealing clear gaps in responsibility, particularly in areas such as the protection of critical maritime infrastructure. Australia's current maritime security structure, which involves over 30 relevant departments and agencies, not only separates civil and military maritime security challenges but also disconnects maritime security from other areas, such as search and rescue. This fragmentation risks both duplication in some areas and gaps in others.

The current multi-agency structure of the MBC, established in 2005 following the 2004 Tonkin review, was designed for a different time and threat landscape. MBC does not operate its own, but coordinates assets from the ABF and ADF. This generates a reliance on the RAN and ADF. This reliance is becoming increasingly unsustainable as the maritime domain grows more contested, creating potential vulnerabilities in the event of a crisis or conflict. This is why the DSR recommended that Defence be used for civil functions only as a last resort.

Compounding the MBC's over-reliance on the RAN and broader ADF is the structure and capabilities of the ABF's maritime element, which has struggled to meet its government-directed targets for sea patrol days and aerial surveillance hours, among other issues. Maritime security trends in the region suggest these pressures will only intensify, placing greater strain on the current structure. The ABF, as a law enforcement organisation, has been unable to develop the expertise needed to maintain maritime capabilities and execute complex operations. In most regional countries, these responsibilities fall to a coastguard paramilitary organisation.

Given the reduction in warning time for crises and the increasing complexity of maritime security threats, it is time to rethink Australia's maritime security structure. A layered defence model, which includes the establishment of a coastguard to address Australia's civil maritime security and maritime home defence, would enhance our capabilities while relieving pressure on the RAN and ADF. Although this approach will not be cost-neutral and will present challenges, the trend of regional countries moving toward a coastguard model demonstrates its significant benefits.

We must address Australia's maritime security structural issues now to strengthen our maritime resilience.



## Notes

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<sup>54</sup> *Enhanced Lethality Surface Combatant Fleet*, p 10.

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**Occasional Paper No. 5**  
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**Time for a coastguard**

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