

## FDI Feature Interview

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### 'I See the Indian Ocean to be as Important as the Pacific' – Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe**  
*FDI Senior Analyst*

#### Key Points

**As the Indian Ocean's importance continues to increase, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston believes that:**

- Australia's defence forces must be able to operate in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans simultaneously
- Australia will need to engage the military leadership of China, India and other Indian Ocean littoral states
- Existing base facilities in Western Australia may be used more frequently, or possibly upgraded

#### Summary

As among the few countries in the world bordering two oceans, since the Second World War Australia's interest toward the Indian Ocean has fluctuated with the advent of strategic rivalry, as seen initially with Germany and Japan, later the Soviet Union, and now the rise of China and India. In this context, **Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston**, who recently retired from the role of Chief of the Defence Force, spoke to FDI's **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** in April about the growing importance of the Indian Ocean to Australia.

## Commentary

### Future Directions International:

*Q: Can you tell us about the importance of the Indian Ocean to Australia?*

**ACM Houston:** As Australia straddles two oceans, I see the Indian Ocean to be as important as the Pacific Ocean. Australia has always been very mindful of the fact that we need to be able to operate in both oceans. We have a large part of our navy based in HMAS Stirling, at Garden Island just south of Perth. We also have naval facilities in Darwin. Whilst we don't have large fleet units in Darwin, we have patrol boats that operate out into the Indian Ocean in those waters around Christmas Island, just short of Indonesia. We do combined patrols with the Indonesians in those waters and do a lot of patrolling with our P-3s. Over the years the P-3s have spent a lot of time over the Indian Ocean.

### Future Directions International:

*Q: How do you view the general implications of the rise of China and India, especially in the context of the Indian Ocean?*

**ACM Houston:** The Indian Ocean is also vitally important because there are a large number of countries that are along its borders or littoral. Of course India, along with China, are the rising powers and India dominates that northern part of the Indian Ocean.

With the rise of China and India we are seeing a phenomenon of the like of which we have not seen in human history. Australia needs to be very much aware of that because at some stage into the future as we look out into our region we can see India, China, Japan and the United States. They are four of the five largest political entities in the world and indeed I think in the fullness of time they will be four of the world's largest economic entities.

Looking out 20 years, we can see the relativities coming into play and the relative strategic weight of the United States will come down as the strategic weight of India and China rises. As that process happens in the Indian Ocean, and also in the Pacific, we could have developments which are inimical to our interests.

The worst of all outcomes would be very intense strategic competition that results in some form of tension or conflict. I believe very strongly that Australia needs to be mindful of all of this and needs to be able to engage not only in the Pacific but also in the Indian Ocean. India is very important to Australia in the long-term, as are the other countries which have a littoral on the Indian Ocean.

In terms of the Indian Ocean, if we have a look at the littoral, we see some of the richest resources around the globe, especially in and around the Persian or Arabian Gulf where you see massive oil reserves. The growing economy of China takes 80 per cent of its energy from the Indian Ocean, from those oil fields on the other side of the Strait of the Hormuz and that oil comes across the Indian Ocean and into the Strait of Malacca and comes to China. Similarly, 70 per cent of India's energy comes from the Gulf and then, of course, I have not even mentioned the economies of Japan and the Republic of Korea.

### **Future Directions International:**

*Q: How do you see Australia's future strategic environment evolving and the types of challenges it will bring?*

**ACM Houston:** Our geography is enduring. What we are seeing is the effect that is overlaying that geography, and that is the rise of China and India. Hopefully, the rise of those two nations can be accommodated peacefully, so that we can enjoy the sort of prosperity we have had in Australia for the last twenty years. Stability gives you prosperity and it is in the interest of the region to manage the rise of these two nations in a way that it does not become a threat or detrimental to the stability of our wider region.

I see a very important role for us in terms of engaging the military defence leadership of those countries that make up our region. That is a very important task because if you are building trust and understanding in the relationships you will by definition have stability and I think that is an important role for us.

Now, I engage with China at my level on an annual basis. We have a strategic dialogue every year with General Chen Bingde, the Commander of the People's Liberation Army. I and the Secretary of the Department have done that for three years in a row. The last meeting was just before Christmas last year. He has been here and we have been to China. We have a good understanding and over time we have built trust in our relationship.

That sort of activity is vitally important. It is important that we have openness, transparency if you like, in our relationships. We need to be open about what we are doing in terms of the way we develop our defence policy, the way we develop our force structure.

I would like to see all the countries of the region be equally open about their defence policy and their force structures so that we build understanding and trust. However, given the meteoric rise of China and the very rapid rise of India, we have got to manage that so that we do not get developments that are adverse to our interests or indeed the interests of other players in the region.

We should all be seeking the same thing: a stable and peaceful region which enables a prosperous future for all. At the end of the day though, you have to hedge against circumstances where it does not go the way you hope it goes. That is why it is important for us to continue developing the defence force with funding of about three per cent real growth, 2.2 per cent after 2018 and develop our Force 2030.

It is important to have a robust defence force that is able to deter in the first instance, or if the worst happens, defeat any sort of military probe that is mounted against our interests. Deterrence is what it is all about. If you have a strong defence force, you discourage miscalculation and misadventure in circumstances that might arrive in the future.

### **Future Directions International:**

*Q: Does the ADF have any plans to either expand upon or build new base facilities in Western Australia?*

**ACM Houston:** As we go forward, it is quite normal for us to basically develop existing base facilities in Western Australia. We do not have any plans to build a new port, but we need to be able to use the infrastructure already there required for our patrol boats which call in to all of those ports in north Western Australia. We have good air base infrastructure, such as the Royal Australian Air Force base at Curtin and Learmonth. They are the two bases that could be expanded if there is a need. In fact Learmonth is used by us on a frequent basis for lots of different purposes, for example, our F-18s staged through there to and from the Middle East during the 2003 Gulf War.

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### **BIOGRAPHY:**

*Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, AC, AFC joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a cadet pilot in 1970. He is a qualified Flight Instructor and completed several instructional tours on Macchi, BAC Strikemaster and Iroquois aircraft in the late 1970's. Air Chief Marshal Houston's principal command appointments include Number 9 Squadron in 1987, during the introduction of the Blackhawk, the relocation of the unit from Amberley to Townsville and its transfer to Army, 5<sup>th</sup> Aviation Regiment in 1989 and Number 86 Wing from 1994-1995. He was also Commander Integrated Air Defence System from 1999-2000. Air Chief Marshal Houston has wide staff experience having served on the Joint Operations staff at Headquarters Australian Defence during the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. He was the Director Air Force Policy during 1992-1993 where he negotiated the establishment of the RSAF Flying School at RAAF Base Pearce. He also served at Headquarters Australian Theatre from 1997-1999 as Chief of Staff, and Head Strategic Command from 2000-2001. He was promoted to Air Chief Marshal and assumed the appointment as Chief of the Defence Force on 4 July 2005, after four years as Chief of Air Force, retiring on 1 July 2011. He is a graduate of the Flying Instructors Course (1975), RAAF Staff College (1985), Joint Services Staff College (1990) and the Royal College of Defence Studies in London (1996). In 2008, Air Chief Marshal Houston was made a Companion of the Order of Australia, having previously been appointed a Member in 1990 and advanced as an Officer in 2003. In 1980 he was awarded the Air Force Cross.*

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