



SPOTLIGHTS

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Spotlight on Australia's Role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy with Dr. David Brewster

Interviewed by Malinda Meegoda*

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The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI) recently interviewed Dr. David Brewster, Senior Research Fellow, National Security College at the Australia National University, to discuss Australia’s priorities in the Indian Ocean, and what that means for concepts and alliances such as the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.

This interview is part of the LKI Spotlight series, which features interviews with thought leaders around the world on current and emerging issues of international relations.

Dr. David Brewster is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Security College, Australian National University, where he works on the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific maritime security. He also holds appointments as Fellow with the Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Centre and Distinguished Research Fellow with the Australia India Institute, University of Melbourne. He is a frequent speaker at international security conferences throughout the region, and is an Australian delegate to several major Track 1.5 security and defence dialogues. Dr. Brewster frequently writes on security developments in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific for numerous publications.

See below for a lightly edited transcript of the interview, featuring Dr. Brewster’s responses to questions posed by Malinda Meegoda, Research Associate at LKI.

LKI: The four Quad Members have [divergent views](#) on the Indo-Pacific contours. *How could a security strategy work without an agreement on what encompasses the Indo-Pacific?*

Dr. Brewster: There is a clear understanding among the Quad members of the various challenges the Indo-Pacific faces. However, the details of a shared strategy are still being worked out, including the allocation of responsibilities and the balance between military and economic cooperation. This will probably take time. The chaotic decision-making of the Trump administration, however, does not make these things easy.

But if you’re looking for bright lines on a world map demarcating exactly where the Indo Pacific begins and ends, then you’re going to be disappointed. Every country in the region is going to have a slightly different geographic perspective depending on their own geography, history and threat perceptions. Indeed one is missing the point if they are looking for bright lines on the map – the Indo-Pacific is just as much a functional as a geographic concept, that is, it reflects how strategic interactions between East Asian states and the Indian Ocean states, principally in the maritime domain, are leading to a strategic convergence between the Pacific and Indian Ocean theatres.

While the principal focus of these strategic interactions is along the Asian littoral between Northeast Asia to the Persian Gulf, some countries will also naturally include associated regions that are important to them. It is no surprise, for example, that India tends to see the region as extending to East Africa, and Australia would see it as including the Pacific Islands.

Part of the strength of the Indo-Pacific concept is its flexibility. There is no piece of paper to sign (or not sign) or overarching club to join (or not join). ASEAN, for example, is currently working out a version of the Indo-Pacific that works for them. That is good and to be expected.

LKI: *How would you characterise Australia-US security relations in the context of the Indo-Pacific Strategy?*

Dr. Brewster: Over the last several years, Australia-US security relations have only become stronger. Australia was the first country to officially recognise the Indo Pacific as its region, and has made a lot of efforts (along with countries such as Japan) to convince Washington of the value of redefining the region. We are now starting to see the consequences of that as the US develops its Indo-Pacific strategy.

The (belated, but bipartisan) realisation in Washington that the US needed to take more concerted action to avoid Chinese hegemony over the Indo-Pacific also meant US' increased recognition of Australia as a key regional partner. In the last couple of years, Australia has also pushed back against attempts by Beijing to interfere in Australia's domestic politics and to buy influence among the Pacific Island states. All of this has brought the US and Australia (and other partners such as Japan and India) closer.

LKI: Australia is yet to be included in the [Malabar naval exercise](#), which includes the rest of the Indo-pacific Quad partners (India, Japan, and the US). *Do you foresee any potential changes in the way of Australia becoming a permanent partner of this naval exercise in the future?*

Dr. Brewster: I wouldn't get too fussed about Malabar. India has its own traditions that guide its approach to multilateral military exercises. It's a symbolic thing for Delhi that it will move on from in its own time. The real action is happening at a bilateral level.

LKI: In one of your [papers](#) you explore ways in which Australia can promote [Maritime Domain Awareness \(MDA\)](#) cooperation in the Indian Ocean. *What are some of the key objectives for Australia in expanding such cooperation efforts?*

Dr. Brewster: MDA is key to maritime security, for both traditional and non-traditional threats. While some countries (including Australia) have very sophisticated national MDA systems, the oceans are so large that even the biggest powers cannot go it alone on MDA. Even the US freely acknowledges this. The challenge is putting together MDA cooperation arrangements that benefit all participating members.

Obviously Australia would like to improve its own MDA, but it is even more important to help empower its partners by improving their own national MDA systems. That does not necessarily involve buying expensive equipment – it could be as 'easy' as putting together a system in which various national agencies that already hold relevant data actually share it via a single system where it could be made sense of and used. Australia's experience in developing a multi-agency national MDA system has been successful. While it is not easy, it can be accomplished

with a bit of will, and that is why I advocate Australia sharing its experience with regional partners such as Sri Lanka. The ability of Sri Lanka to better govern and police its waters could significantly benefit Australia's security.

LKI: Australia's 2016 [defence white paper](#) identified Sri Lanka as an important strategic node in the Indian Ocean region. Recent events such as the arrival of four vessels from the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) under the [Indo-Pacific Endeavor 2019](#) banner seems to reaffirm the view of the white paper. *What are some of the key overlapping concerns that Australia and Sri Lanka could prioritise in the maritime domain?*

Dr. Brewster: It is key for Australia and Sri Lanka to build their strategic relationship, as these are two democracies of similar size (in terms of population, if not in land) and have many shared interests in building a stable and prosperous Indian Ocean, where strategic competition among major powers is kept to a minimum. As a major trading country, Australia depends heavily on the freedom of navigation and a rules-based order - as does Sri Lanka.

Australia recognised the strategic importance of Sri Lanka as far back as 1942 when it made a decision to send a large part of its army (then fighting in the Middle East) to defend Sri Lanka rather than bringing them home to defend Australia from the threat of invasion. It was a big call at that time.

I hope that the visit of the Australian Navy as part of Indo Pacific Endeavour 2019 is just another step in ramped up cooperation. The trick will be in figuring out what are Sri Lanka's most pertinent needs and how Australia can help – while playing to its own strengths.

Further Readings:

Brewster, D. (2018). *Give light, and the darkness will disappear: Australia's quest for maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean*. *Journal of the Indian Ocean*. [Online]. Available at: https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/nsc_crawford_anu_edu_au/2018-10/australias_quest_for_maritime_domain_awareness_in_the_indian_ocean_-_brewster.pdf

Kumar, Y. (2019). *Diplomatic Dimension of Maritime Challenges Facing the Indian Ocean – One Indian Perspective*. *The Prospector*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.lki.lk/blog/diplomatic-dimension-of-maritime-challenges-facing-the-indian-ocean-one-indian-perspective/>

Panda, A. (2019). *The 2019 US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Who's It For?* *The Diplomat*. [Online]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/the-2019-us-indo-pacific-strategy-report-whos-it-for/>

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